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Health

# Life Lines

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## Breaking the Silence – Navigating Men’s Mental Health Challenges and Offering Support

There are many stereotypes of masculinity. Men are supposed to be strong and emotionally resilient, but these persistent ideals have shaped expectations placed upon men for too long. Instead, they've fostered a culture that tends to discourage men from expressing their vulnerability and emotions because "real men" should be stoic and unyielding. All of this directly affects men's mental health; breaking the silence around it is a pressing imperative.

Societal and cultural influences perpetuate the myth that men seeking help for mental health struggles are weak. These ingrained beliefs have profound consequences and contribute to the alarming rates of undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues among men. It is time to recognize the need to dismantle barriers and foster an environment where men feel both empowered and encouraged to be open about their mental health. Ultimately, achieving this will pave the way for happier and healthier lives for everyone.

In this article, we'll address the complexities of men's mental health. We can start to break free from some of the constraints of societal and cultural influences and relieve some of the pressure that men experience that influences their reluctance and delay in seeking help for mental health. Talking about men's mental health transparently is

essential to reduce stigma. It also emphasizes the need for everyone to recognize how there is more room to be more compassionate.

### How does stigma affect how men relate to mental health challenges?

Despite advances and improvements in our overall understanding of mental health, men experiencing mental health challenges often suffer alone. Stigma creates additional complexity when people struggle because they often experience "discrimination, avoidance, and rejection."<sup>1</sup> It has many facets, including "social (public) stigma, self-stigma (perceived), professional stigma, and cultural stigma," which create "extreme barrier[s]" for seeking help.<sup>2</sup> Many men fear being seen as less masculine or weak, which can build feelings of inadequacy and worsen their self-esteem. Stigma can influence men's choices towards less healthy coping mechanisms like aggression or substance use to help them deal with emotional pain. Some men tend to be more comfortable focusing on physical ailments instead, which in turn delays diagnosis and treatment and creates longer recovery times.<sup>3</sup>

From an early age, social conditioning encourages boys to be “strong, independent and emotionally stoic, while girls are expected to be nurturing, empathetic, and compliant.”<sup>4</sup> The long-term effects have men “hide their vulnerabilities and suppress their emotions”.<sup>5</sup>

## What are some notable differences in men’s mental health experiences?

The mental health challenges men experience are likely far more common than reported. For example, while depression can affect anyone, regardless of gender, there are differences in how men and women experience and exhibit symptoms. Some researchers have observed that men have more difficulty processing loss and grief over their lifetime. Many life stressors, such as physical illness, financial problems, and relationship breakdowns, become overwhelming and contribute to the manifestation of grief.<sup>6</sup>

Here are some differences to be aware of in how depression may present differently in men and women.

	Men	Women
<b>Expression of Emotions</b>	<b>May be more:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irritable, angry and aggressive</li> <li>• Likely to engage in excessive amounts of time at work or playing sports</li> <li>• Likely to use substances</li> <li>• Likely to have interpersonal issues</li> </ul>	<b>More likely to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cry</li> <li>• Exhibit sadness</li> <li>• Discuss feelings</li> <li>• Be lethargic</li> <li>• Feel and express emptiness</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Symptoms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Digestive issues</li> <li>• Body aches and pain</li> <li>• Racing heart / cardiovascular disease</li> <li>• Exhaustion, lack of energy, sleep disruptions</li> <li>• Loss of appetite</li> <li>• Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>• Low levels of testosterone</li> </ul>	<b>More likely to be founded in emotional expressions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prolonged sadness</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Hopelessness</li> <li>• Feeling tired</li> <li>• Sleeping difficulties</li> </ul>
<b>Coping Mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging in high-risk behaviours to try and “mask more typical symptoms of depression”<sup>7</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Reckless driving</li> <li>◦ Excessive substance use</li> <li>◦ Becoming overly sexually active, seeking “emotionless sexual encounters”<sup>8</sup></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>More likely to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek social support</li> <li>• Engage in self-soothing activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Talking with friends</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Engage in creative expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Journaling</li> <li>◦ Dancing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Seeking professional help</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less likely to seek help because of stigma, societal influences and male stereotypes</li> <li>• Avoidance may have them reach a crisis and need to attend an emergency room rather than work with a family physician</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More likely to reach out for help from friends, family, or mental health professionals</li> </ul>

## How does this information apply when people identify as Transgender, Gender Neutral/Non-Binary?

It’s critical to approach mental health with an open mind that considers gender-affirming and inclusive perspectives, recognizing that someone’s biological and psychosocial influences can vary widely and may not align with traditional expressions of symptoms of mental health challenges or distress.

- They may have **coping mechanisms** that depend on their unique identity and experiences and do not align with traditional gender roles.
- If they experience **gender dysphoria**, they feel more intense distress and depression.
- Their gender identity may influence **access to mental health care and supportive services**. It can affect their ability to access gender-affirming appropriate treatment. It could “create a profound sense of isolation, as they may feel misunderstood or rejected by their communities.”<sup>9</sup>
- They may experience **chronic stress** due to “fear of judgement, discrimination, or violence.”<sup>10</sup>

Mental health professionals need to be sensitive to the specific needs and tailor therapy that acknowledges the impact of gender identity as part of the assistance.

## What do studies tell us about how prevalent mental health issues are for men?

The statistics about men’s mental health can be shocking, but being well-informed can help increase awareness of how crucial it is to change the narrative and encourage men to get the help they need.

- In the U.S., over 6 million men suffer from depression yearly. It is often underdiagnosed.<sup>11</sup>
- More than 3 million men in the U.S. have panic disorder, agoraphobia, or another phobia.<sup>12</sup>
- 90% of the 3.5 million people in the U.S. who live with schizophrenia are men, diagnosed by age 30.<sup>13</sup>
- The highest suicide rates in the U.S. are in Caucasian men over 85.<sup>14</sup>
- In the U.S., gay males are at an increased risk for suicide attempts, especially before age 25.<sup>15</sup>
- While approximately 1 million Canadian men suffer from major depression yearly, only 30% use available mental health services.<sup>16</sup>
- 80% of Canadian men have spoken with a healthcare practitioner in the past 12 months as of June 2023.<sup>17</sup>
- Canadians were more likely to prioritize their physical health than their mental health. However, while nearly 1/3 of women selected mental health as a top priority, only 1/4 of men noted the same.<sup>18</sup>

- 26% of Canadian men said that if they were feeling down or agitated more often than usual, they would either wait over a year or not make an appointment at all if these feelings arose.<sup>19</sup>
- 76% of all suicides in Canada in 2019 were by men. 38% (the highest number) were men aged 40-60.<sup>20</sup>
- While women attempt suicide twice as often as men, men die by suicide three times as often as women.<sup>21</sup>

## Suicide disparities for men

Men consistently have higher suicide rates in many countries worldwide, especially in middle-aged and older age groups. They also tend to use more lethal methods that are more likely to have their attempts result in death. Targeting mental health awareness is crucial to help reduce the stigma surrounding seeking treatment for mental health challenges. At the same time, the available services must be accessible and gender sensitive. Family, workplace, and community support are essential in suicide prevention.

## What are some beneficial prevention and intervention strategies?

Remember that a combination of strategies may be most effective, recognizing each person’s individual needs and circumstances.

**Increasing awareness and accessibility** when it comes to men’s mental health, services can work to avoid glamorizing or sensationalizing suicide through more responsible portrayals of men in the media who are dealing with mental health issues. It can also encourage more men to be open to conversations within their communities, families, and workplaces. Education can help us to:

- Recognize signs of mental health distress and promote help-seeking to destigmatize the issue.
- Ensure that access to mental health and crisis supports are available, accessible, and affordable.
- Train first responders, community leaders, teachers and medical teams to recognize men’s unique warning signs and specific risk factors such as excessive or untypical substance use or aggressive behaviour.
- Be open to developing support networks, social connections and self-help resources tailored to men’s needs and introduce the value of help-seeking and positive coping strategies to build resilience.
- Create crisis intervention plans for men who are at risk that outline what steps to take in case of a mental health emergency.
- Restrict access to weapons/firearms, medication, and other lethal means that men tend to access during crises.

**Stress reduction techniques and healthy coping mechanisms** can help men understand how to detect vulnerable changes in their mental health status rather than waiting for a crisis. For example, there are proven benefits of regular exercise in that it can:

- Reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.
- Improve a sense of self, boosting mood, self-worth, and self-esteem.
- Boost energy and clarity of thinking.
- Help release beneficial endorphins to clear the body of stress hormones such as cortisol.
- Be beneficial to participate in collaborative sports teams and avoid ultra-competitive/individualistic sports that build machoism.

Not discounting the value of **self-care basics and engaging in enjoyable activities** can also prevent crises. It may include quite apparent things but also help with releasing inhibitions that may be holding someone back:

- Getting restful sleep.
- Practicing good nutrition.
- Finding purpose through friends, family, and community involvement to forge social connections and belonging.
- Speaking with a therapist to explore supports/boundaries and develop resilience. It could also involve joining a peer support group for other men experiencing similar feelings or fulfilling similar roles and obligations.

## Encouraging conversations about men’s mental health

Common stereotypes that hinder open discussions about men’s mental health include:

- The expectation that men should not show emotions, express vulnerability, or ask for help.
- The belief that men should be tough, aggressive, and dominant.
- The idea that men must be independent and self-reliant to solve all problems on their own without seeking support or help.
- The fear that admitting to mental health struggles will be seen as a weakness, failure, inadequacy, or somehow less masculine.
- The tendency to suppress strong emotions and feelings rather than address them earlier and be more proactive in looking for solutions to pain and promote recovery.
- The insensitivity of common expressions such as “man up” that trivialize normal emotional responses and promote vocabulary limitations that suppress emotional expression.
- The fear of being judged by peers, co-workers, partners, or family members if they are transparent about their mental health.

Breaking these stereotypes down helps create a supportive environment to address men’s mental health needs without fear, stigma, or judgment. We must provide safe spaces for men to discuss their feelings and share their experiences openly.

## Conversation starters

While it can be difficult for men and others, starting with an open conversation can be the best approach to take. Consider trying some of these suggestions to start a conversation if you notice someone in your life may be struggling:<sup>22</sup>

- How are you feeling on a scale of 1 to 10?
- You’ve been a bit quiet, how are you?
- How is work at the moment?
- When did you start feeling this way?
- How are you coping?
- Who else can you talk to?
- What help do you need?

## The power of education and awareness

Some prominent men have overcome stigma and sought help, demonstrating that to do so is a sign of strength. Their stories can encourage other men to do the same.

1. **Prince Harry** has been candid about struggling with grief and mental health after his mother’s death. He co-founded the Invictus Games to promote open conversations about mental well-being and camaraderie for military service people through sport.
2. Comedian **Trevor Noah** has spoken publicly about his experiences with depression to challenge mental health stigma and promote understanding.
3. Actor and comedian **Wayne Brady** has shared his struggles with depression and anxiety to encourage other men to seek help and prioritize mental health and well-being.
4. Actor and former wrestler **Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson** has openly discussed his struggles with depression and advocates for increased mental health awareness and self-care.

We’re also sharing some resources published by the **Centre for Suicide Prevention and Mental Health** that you can explore. They have been specifically developed for men.<sup>23</sup>

**Buddy Up** - A men’s suicide prevention communications campaign: a call to action to men, by men

**Tough Enough to Talk About It** - A program for men working in trades, industry, and agriculture



**Man Therapy** - An interactive website that encourages men to address their mental health and seek help if necessary

**DUDES Clubs** - Spaces that facilitate a participant-led community for men’s wellness

**HeadsUpGuys** - Online information and resources to encourage help among men at risk for depression and suicide

**Men’s Sheds** - Community-based safe and friendly environments where men can learn practical skills, develop new interests, work on meaningful projects, connect with other men, and talk about their problems

**November** – Information about mental health and suicide prevention

Men’s mental health is not just about individual well-being. It benefits us all by creating a more inclusive, empathetic, and supportive environment. By dismantling stereotypes around men’s emotional well-being, we can help save lives, improve relationships, and promote gender equality. Supportive changes in perception will help break the silence around men’s mental health.

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