

WHAT MEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

6 things men need to know about mental health

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Before boys even hit puberty, they're absorbing lessons from society about what it means to be a man. All too often, they're told to shrug off emotional pain and turn away from the help of others. "Somehow we frame seeking help as like a failure," said Matt Englar-Carlson, a US professor of counselling at California State University, Fullerton. "It doesn't matter if you're asking for directions or you're going to see the GP or psychologist."

Many men end up either ignoring mental health problems or trying to handle them alone. A 2024 survey of roughly 70,000 American adults found that around 20% of men experienced a mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety, in the previous year.

Other studies have shown that men are less likely to seek care than women, it takes longer for them to feel better, and they are more likely to drop out of treatment.

At the same time, men are more than twice as likely as women to misuse drugs and alcohol, and in 2023, men died by suicide almost four times more than women did.

The best thing people can do to guard against these risks, psychologists say, is to build stronger social connections with family and friends. But it's also important to know when it's time to reach out to a mental health professional.

With this in mind, we asked psychologists what they want men to know about their mental health. Here's what they said.

Men are diagnosed with depression at around half the rate that women are. But this is partly because depressed men often show slightly different symptoms, said Derek Griffith, a medical ethics professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

"It's not 100% clear that the way that we're diagnosing men is accurately identifying the men who are in need," he said.

Studies show that while both women and men with depression express symptoms like lethargy or loss of interest in activities, men are more likely to express risk-taking; feelings of anger and irritability; or even physical symptoms like headaches or stomach problems.

This is often called masked or maletype depression, said Daniel Singley, a US psychologist at the Center for Men's Excellence in San Diego. When these male-type symptoms of depression are taken into account, Griffith said, the differences in diagnosis rates between men and women disappear.

Many men may not even recognise that they are depressed. Feeling irritable and angry every now and then might be signs of everyday stress, but if you feel these emotions all the time, or loved ones have noticed them, ask yourself whether they might be symptoms of depression, Singley said.

Postpartum depression is a well-recognised health risk among women, affecting 10% to 20% of new mothers. But as many as 10% of new fathers are diagnosed with it, too.

"It's a major life identity change to go from dude to dad," Singley said.

Becoming a new father can be especially stressful for those with a history of poor mental health and can cause the recurrence of symptoms like anxiety, he added.

Singley said that new dads often think their only role is to support their partner, neglecting their own well-being. It's crucial that they also look after themselves, he added, by getting good sleep, eating well, exercising and connecting with friends.

This can be hard with a new baby, but even a few minutes a day to yourself can help. Having strong social supports beyond your partner or immediate family is also important, Singley said.

"Be supportive, but don't stop there," he said.

Broadly speaking, middle-aged and older Americans are at the greatest risk for suicide, with the highest rates among men older than 75. Native Americans and Native Alaskans are at the greatest risk, followed by non-Hispanic white men.

But a closer look at demographics complicates this story. Among most racial and ethnic groups, suicide risk peaks before age 35 and falls with age. But for white men, it steadily rises.

Researchers have focused largely on lower socioeconomic status as a driver of worse mental health outcomes, Griffith said. As a result, older men, who are often wealthier than their younger counterparts, have generally received less attention by mental health research and awareness campaigns, he added.

Yet it's just as crucial to recognise signs of poor mental health, like increased drinking or worse sleep, in older men.

Every expert agreed that men can improve their mental health by forging connections with others. Many people do this by meeting friends for workouts at the gym or by joining a sports team. They get the combined mental health benefits of fitness and community.

But don't overdo it, Englar-Carlson said. He sees many men who believe only major lifestyle changes, like running a marathon or getting a six-pack, will help lift a period of low mood, he said. "They get sold on the home run," he said.

Instead, focus on regular but not excessive exercise routines. A 2018 study of American adults found that those who took part in team sports, cycled or hit the gym three to five times a week had fewer days of poor mental health each month. But people who exercised more than that had worse mental health.

Several psychologists mentioned that troubled relationships can cause emotional distress, but men may not recognise the damage that can come out of them or may not seek support. That includes psychological or physical abuse, said Saed Hill, a community support specialist at Yale University.

There is no question that women are much more likely to be victims of domestic abuse than men. Still, nearly 1-in-7 men has experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, according to a national survey.

Isolation and shame often keep them from sharing this abuse with health professionals, said Ben Hine, a psychologist at the University of West London, who was an author of a 2022 study of men who called a domestic violence hotline.

"They thought they must be one of the only people this has ever happened to," he said.

Organisations like the National Domestic Violence Hotline in the US and many shelters offer services to men who have been abused.

While society still might push men to bottle up their feelings, experts said that many are finding the courage to reach out. While men are less likely than women to seek mental health help, more than three times as many men sought help in 2023 as they did in 2014.

Men should turn to therapy at any stage of their journey towards better mental health, not just during a crisis, experts said.

“It’s OK to not know how you feel or exactly what the problem is,” said Will Elder, a psychologist at South Texas Veterans Health Care System.

Many men worry that their therapist will try to pressure them in some way during sessions, Elder said. But you are in control of everything that happens during therapy, he added.

“Your psychologist’s job is to just help you make great decisions so you feel good about what you’re doing,” he said.