



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #11:

MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH



Men and women experience many of the same mental health disorders, but their willingness to talk about their challenges and feelings are very different. The perceived standards of masculinity and stigmas surrounding men seeking support for mental health disorders continue to present challenges. In scenarios where a lack of conversation surrounding mental health related challenges exist, the absence of communication may lead to a worsening of underlying conditions and to a more acute state of the presenting disorder.

Here are some facts about Canadian men and their mental health;

- Around 10% of Canadian men experience significant mental health challenges in their life¹
- Approximately one million Canadian men suffer from major depression each year²

- On average, approximately 4,000 Canadians take their own life each year, of those suicides; 75% are men³
- Canadian indigenous men have a suicide rate that is double that of the Canadian national average, with Inuit men being 11 times the national average⁴
- Gay men have a higher rate of depression, anxiety, suicidality, self-harm, and substance abuse in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts⁵
- In order of highest to lowest, Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Yukon, New Brunswick, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Alberta have the highest suicide rates among men in Canada⁶

So why is this happening? Why are so few men seeking treatment for mental health challenges?



The current climate of men's mental health

The current climate for men's mental health has come to a critical point in history, where national strategies need to be made to address the increasing number of men who are experiencing mental health-related challenges.

As a society, stigmas associated with mental health are prevalent and common. Men face the added stigma that seeking help for mental health is a sign of weakness, that 'real men' don't ask for help, and that talking about topics like anxiety and depression won't help. Men often experience further bias within male counterparts with the perceived belief that mental health challenges make men a burden to others, and men should be able to control and manage their own feelings. Whatever the stigmas, we need to stop shaming men into thinking they are inadequate if they express a need to address mental health challenges or concerns. Without support and empathy, men will continue to suffer in silence and experience worsening or more acute challenges with mental health disorders.

Addressing men's mental health challenges

If we look at our individual ability to support and facilitate change, there is a lot that we can do to influence how we think about men's mental health. Becoming an ally for those in need of, or seeking mental health support provides a safe, unbiased and supportive network for those in need.

One of the significant challenges with helping men address their mental health is encouraging and allowing them to speak openly and confidently about it. Men are typically conditioned throughout their life to not speak or act emotionally. As a supportive resource for men, it is always helpful to be aware of the signs and symptoms that a male in your life may be experiencing mental health-related concerns. Although day to day changes in behaviour are common and not cause for immediate concern, if behavioural changes continue for an extended period, typically two (2) to four (4) weeks it may be an indication of a mental health disorder. Here are a few visible indicators that someone may be experiencing challenges with their mental health:

1. Their personality has changed from the norm, such as experiencing mood swings, excessive anger, hostility, or violent behaviour and having the inability to cope with minor problems and daily activities

2. They are experiencing excessive anxieties or prolonged depressive states, losing interest in hobbies or social activities they were usually interested or participated in
3. There has been an increased use of alcohol and/or drugs, which is beginning to affect their work and personal life
4. There is a noticeable difference in their ability to think clearly and articulate their thoughts in a cohesive manner
5. Their sleep and eating patterns (i.e. over or under eating) have noticeably changed, resulting in the individual seeming tired and irritable
6. They may be experiencing strange or grandiose ideas, delusions, or hallucinations, which may include thinking or talking about suicide

It's common for these indicators to be signs of physical illness as well. It's important not to diagnose, and seeking support from a physician, qualified medical professional, or counsellor may be a positive first step in finding help. So what can be done if you notice some of the above signs and symptoms?

How to support men's mental health

With a greater understanding of the challenges men face when it comes to mental health, and given the various signs and symptoms that your male counterparts may exhibit, what are the actions that you and/or your organization should be doing to support men's mental health?

- 1. Become better informed.** Understanding what men may be facing when it comes to mental health is the first step in supporting them. Reaching out to local men's health organizations is a great way to further your learning.
- 2. Ask what you can do.** Mental health-related challenges can be difficult for anyone to talk about, so simply asking the question can be a significant step in providing the right support to this individual.
- 3. Be there to listen.** It takes a lot of courage for someone to open up about their mental health. Listening can be one of the most powerful ways to help someone, as it allows the individual to process and share their challenges.

4. Don't blame or judge. Judgement or blame can increase the challenges someone is already facing and may decrease their willingness to share or seek support. The best support you can give is being empathic and compassionate.

5. Guide the person to appropriate supports. You can either direct them to their Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), local support groups, a counsellor or a therapist. Although you cannot determine severity, ensuring the individual is safe and aware of options including out-patient and in-patient treatment facilities for those in need are key elements in taking the first steps towards getting help. But always ask first.

6. Be optimistic and encouraging. Reassure the person that this is a medical issue and that they are not alone in what they are experiencing. Where possible, provide the time, access to treatment and support needed.

7. Take care of yourself. You cannot support anyone with mental health challenges if you are emotionally drained. Protect your physical and emotional health above all.

Men aren't unique to the stigmas associated with mental health; they may be less likely to discuss or address their concerns due to specific conditioning. As a society, we can work together to address stigmas about mental health, and encourage more people to discuss their challenges openly. The more we become comfortable talking about these challenges, the healthier our society will be. Support the men in your life by being an advocate for reducing stigmas around mental health, and being a voice for them when they need you the most.

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