

Men and Mental Wellbeing

Good physical and mental health is more than the absence of sickness in our lives.

Wellness is about adopting life-style practices that improve our chances of not getting sick or when illness occurs we are in a better place to manage it.

Mental health issues are more difficult to acknowledge and address than physical ailments but the symptoms and the impact on our lives are just as real.

Mental illness is often accompanied by stigma and misunderstanding which results in a person feeling more isolated and alone.



Just as we can take life style precautions to safeguard our physical health, we can also take steps to promote mental wellbeing.

Here are a few tips to think about:

- Develop and maintain strong supportive relationships – wife, partner, children and friends. We are social animals and the people in our lives are our most important asset. In order to look after that asset requires time and care. When we do the returns are many.
- Find someone you can talk to and who will listen. This someone maybe within the family or outside such as, your partner, a mate, work college or a professional. We all need someone to talk to when life gets tough. Two heads are better than one. For many men this might be the greatest challenge. In tough times we tend to isolate ourselves and try to go it alone.

- Broaden your interests and do things you enjoy. There is more to life than work. So much of a man's identity and sense of worth is link to his work and what he contributes to his family and society. Engaging in creative activities, hobbies and sport provide a greater dimension to our lives. Playfulness and humour are important contributors to health.
- There is an intimate link between physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. When is not functioning the rest of the system is affected. By taking care of our bodies, we take care of our minds. Think about your lifestyle. Eating well, exercising regularly, drinking in moderation, not smoking are proven strategies for health.



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- Look to develop new skills. We are all bombarded by pressures and stressors of one sort or another. Our management of these will be assisted by equipping ourselves with techniques such as stress and anger management and assertive and communication skills.
- Listen to what you are telling yourself. So often when under pressure our thinking turns negative – ruminating on the same thing over and over, blaming other, self pity, hopelessness, and revenge and certainly not wanting to take responsibility for our lives. These are important warning signs to take notice of.
- Be aware of what is happening within you and around you. Act sooner than later while

recognising that there are some things in our lives we can change and some things we can't.

- Develop the capacity to ask for help and not go it alone. Again this represents another challenge for men. Many of the messages we receive as we grow into manhood are about standing on your feet and solving your own problems. Some things we can manage alone, but there are some things we can't. Knowing the difference is another important skill.



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Actions you can take

1. Focus on What You Can Do

Resist the urge to give up or run away from stressful problems – these types of coping choices often make stress worse in the long run.

2. Manage Your Emotions

Feelings of sadness, anger, fear and other forms of distress are common when coping with stress. It is more difficult to feel happiness, contentment or joy when coping with stress. Try not to bottle your emotions up – instead try expressing your feelings by talking or writing them down. Try not to lash out at other people. Many of the coping strategies listed below are also useful ways of managing our emotions.

3. Seek Out Support

Seeking social support from other people is helpful – especially when we feel we can't cope on our own. Family, friends, co-workers and health professionals can all be important sources of support. Ask someone for their opinion or advice on how to handle the situation. Get more information to help make decisions. Accept help with daily tasks and responsibilities and emotional support.

4. Focus on the Positives

This is one of the hardest things to do when coping with stress and at times can seem impossible. Dwelling on the negatives often adds to our stress and takes away our motivation to make things better.

5. Make a Plan of Action

Problem-solving the controllable aspects of a stressful situation are one of the most effective ways to lower our stress. Try breaking a stressful problem into manageable chunks. A good plan of action can involve putting other tasks on hold to concentrate on the main problem or waiting for the right time and place to act.

- Identify and define the problem
- Select your goal
- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Consider the pros and cons
- Choose the best solution – the perfect solution rarely exists

- Put your plan into action
- Evaluate your efforts and choose another strategy if need be.

6. Self-Care

None of us will cope well if we do not take care of the basics. Taking good care of ourselves can be difficult during stressful times. If we don't balance work with play, most of us will experience burn out. Eat healthy foods and drink lots of water throughout the day to maintain your energy. Try to exercise or do something active on a regular basis. Try to avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way of coping. Practice meditation, yoga or other relaxation techniques. Take regular breaks from work to maintain stamina. Plan fun activities and hobbies so you can look forward to them Get a good night's sleep.



Actions you can take

7. Take care of relationships

Family, friends and co-workers can be affected by our stress but they can also be part of the problem! Keep the feelings and needs of others in mind when coping with stress, but balance them with your own feelings and needs.

8. Acceptance

Accepting those things we cannot change can be the most challenging aspect of coping with stress. Sometimes all we can do is manage our distress or grief. Denying the problem exists will only prolong our suffering and interferes with our ability to take action. Acceptance is a process that takes time, so be patient. Death, illness, major losses or major life changes can be particularly difficult to accept. Try not to get caught up in wishful thinking or dwelling on what could have been.

9. Distraction

Distraction can be helpful when coping with short-term stress we can't control (e.g. reading a magazine while getting dental work done). Distraction can be harmful if it interferes with us taking action over things under our control. Distraction by using drugs, alcohol or over-eating usually leads to more stress and problems in the long-term. Distraction by overworking can easily lead to burnout or other problems (e.g. family resentment).

10. Seek Professional Help

There are a number of professional services and men's groups that are available to provide confidential help, support and information. A good starting place is to call Mensline Australia or checkout their website to find out more about options to help.



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Helping Others

1. Active Engagement

Don't wait for an individual to approach you; individual men may be reluctant to seek out help or disclose vulnerability

2. Trust your guts

Often we get an unconscious sense that something is not right with a person; check out your unease with others before acting.

3. Look for indicators of changes in behaviour:

- Verbal – listen to language being used e.g. “I feel as though I can't go on”; “I have had enough”; “what's the point of all this”; “things are not good”, etc
- Non-verbal behaviours
 - > Stressful situations may be accompanied by the fight / flight response
 - > Fight – aggressive behaviour (language); fights / conflict triggered by seemingly small issues; disproportional response

to an issue; physical agitation in a particular situation; increased risk taking

- > Flight – physical withdrawal – isolates from friends / community / peers; silence – doesn't join in conversation; chooses to work alone than with others; absent from work; starts late / leave early; sickness; heavy drinking; party boy – doesn't want to be alone; increased work load (working late)
- > Kinesthetic manifestations of stress – shaking (hands / feet); fidgety;
- > Tears; incoherent thinking / speaking; unable to process information
- > Sleep – too much / too little; food – too much / too little; smoking increased; changes in normal routines

4. Supportive Skills

In reaching out to someone and engaging their trust, it is important to employ:

- Active listening – open and closed questions; reflection of feelings, summarising, etc
- Reflect Empathy – reflect feelings and meaning
- Demonstrate Genuineness / authenticity
- Reflect Informality
- Approaches that equalise the relationship (side by side approach) – particularly if there is an authority / power differential.

5. What Not To Do

- Interrogate or demand disclosure
- Judge or criticise – no matter what you hear
- Breach confidentiality (unless there is a clear risk of harm to self or others)
- Give advice or tell them what to do
- Become a counselor or therapist – know and set clear boundaries.



Helping Others

6. Engagement

a. Role clarity: Understand and be clear about your role and the relationship between you and the individual. You are not a counselor or therapist.

b. Timing the approach: Choose an appropriate opportunity to raise concerns; a time when other are not around.

c. Be concrete in your observations: Be careful to avoid making personally interpretation / judgements about what might be happening. E.g. “John, I have noticed that you have not been joining activities like you used to, I am wonder if there is anything bothering you?”

d. Acknowledge: If person discloses or you become aware that something has happened in their life – acknowledge the likely emotional impact on them. “That is a significant event, you must be feeling ... distress, confusion, sadness, anger, etc”.

e. Normalise: Let them know that their response to

stressful situations is normal – often men think they are going crazy or behaviour and feelings are not right; or they are the only one who feels this way. A Mental Disorder is a diagnosable illness. One in five Australian adults will suffer from some form of common mental disorder in any year. Common mental disorders include depression and anxiety. Schizophrenia and bipolar disorders are less common.

f. Be genuine: You must be authentic in your concern and support – people will know when you are not real and you are just going through the motions

g. Check your hunches: Don't be afraid to ask the “Suicide” question; Naming and breaking the silence helps contain the situation;

h. Resources and supports: Check out what supports he might have access to such as family, friends, doctor, etc. This will provide you with information about isolation and whether the individual has

reached out to such supports in their life.

i. Referrals: In some cases professional support may be required. Again raise the question of referral within the context of acknowledging what is happening for them; it is important to normalise help seeking – it is not unmanly. Supported referrals are more successful. This might mean, for example, offering to assist the individual to link with services rather simply giving them a number to ring.

j. Check-in: Contract to follow-up with the person after the initial conversation; check-in that they were able to get to the referral you gave them.

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Getting Information and Help

There are a number of organisations able to provide confidential assistance.

This includes services that are specifically trained to work with men.

The organisations identified do not make up a comprehensive of services that may be available in your local area.

A number of services not included are those which incur a fee.

A more extensive list of services, including those with specialist expertise in mental health and wellbeing can be found on the Mensline Australia website at www.menslineaus.org.au.



Mensline Australia	www.menslineaus.org.au Telephone 1300789978	National
MENDS	www.mends.com.au Telephone 1300 363 361	QLD, NSW, WA and VIC
Canberra's Men Centre	www.menscentre.com.au Telephone 02 6230 1223	ACT and surrounding region
Mensline	www.menslink.org.au Telephone 02 62394699	ACT
Sydney Men's Network	www.peerleadership.com.au 02 98794979	NSW (Sydney)
Centacare	Telephone 02 9390 5355	NSW
Salvation Army Counselling Service	Telephone 02 47311544	NSW
Men's Phone Line	www.gelworks.com.au Telephone 02 9979909	NSW (Sydney)
North Coast Area Health Service	www.ncahs.nsw.gov.au Telephone 02 66222240	NSW North Coast
Lismore Men's Resource Centre	www.ncahs.sw.gov.au Telephone 02 99226116	NSW North Coast
Men's Health and well being	www.mhwag.org.au Telephone 07 30090436	Queensland
Mensline Queensland	www.dvconnect.org	Queensland
Men's Alliance Group	Telephone 07 41254215	Queensland Sunshine Coast
Men's family Services	www.mensfs.com Telephone 1300 305 340	Queensland South East
Men's Information and Support Centre	www.misc.com.au	South Australia Adelaide
Salisbury West Community Health Centre	Telephone 08 82817644	South Australia Ti Tree Gully and Salisbury
Tools For Men	www.anglicare-tas.org.au Telephone 6234 3561	Tasmania
MHIRRA	Toll Free 1300 785 7644	Tasmania
The Men's Workshop	www.mensworkshop.com.au Telephone 03 97522202	Victoria Melbourne
Men's Referral Service	www.nty.net.au Telephone 03 9428 2899 STD Toll Free 1800065973	Victoria
Men's Resource Centre	Telephone 08 9841 4777	Western Australia Albany
The Mate's Men's Support Group	Telephone 08 9752 3217	Western Australia
WA Men's Health	Telephone 08 9439 1585	Western Australia Gold Fields, Geraldton, Northam
Men's Time	www.menstime.com.au Telephone 08 92632050	Western Australia – Perth and Rural Areas

Getting Information and Help

Men Specific Websites: Health and Mental Health Information and Online Services

Australian Men's Health Network	www.members.ozemail.com.au
Manhood Online	www.manhood.com.au
Men's Health and Information Resource Centre	www.menshealth.usw.edu.au
Men's health and Wellbeing	www.mhwaq.org.au
Men's Advisory Network	www.man.org.au
Men's Awareness Network	www.mnnet.com.au
Men's Health Network	www.menshealthnetwork.org
Men's Peer Health Education	www.dva.gov.au/health/menshealth
Read the Signs Campaign	www.readthesigns.com.au

General Web Based Mental Health and Well Being Sites:

Black Dog Institute	www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
DepressioNet	www.depressionet.com.au
Moodgym	www.moodgym.anu.edu.au
Just Look Website	www.justlook.org.au
Beyond blue	www.beyondblue.org.au
Blue Pages	www.bluepages.anu.edu.au
SANE	www.sane.org
Health Insight	www.healthinsite.gov.au
Mental Health Ne	www.mentalhelp.net
Even Keel	www.evenkeel.org.au



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Recognising the Importance of Gender

From the time we are born we receive instruction from our community about how we should be as boys and girls in the world.

We are taught a complex system of beliefs, attitudes, values and assumptions about what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman.

This system shapes the way we see the world, how I should act in relationship to myself, women and other men.

Fortunately, gender identity is flexible and there is not one definition of masculinity but multiple masculinities. In other words what it means to be a man in one community may vary from what it means to be a man in another community. Moreover a man may vary the expression his masculinity according to the circumstances he finds himself in.

While we acknowledge that there are many expressions of masculinity and femininity, research has shown that there are common values to be found across various expressions of masculinity. Within in Western cultures importance is placed on being rational, logical, independent, dominant, competitive, self-reliant, stoic, tough, competent, invulnerable, unemotional and successful, to name a few.

These values are good values.



However, when taken as a whole and placed within a rigid framework, call “optimal masculinity” that says there can be no deviation from this way of being, then research is beginning to show that there will be important physical and mental consequences. Some of these include:

- Greater levels of psychological distress when the image in my head doesn't match the reality of my behaviour or other's behaviour; in other words I or others act contrary to what is expected of my gender.



Recognising the Importance of Gender

- Unable or unwilling to express how I really feel, particularly if those feelings reveal any vulnerability, such hurt, sadness, shame, etc
- Unable or have difficulty being affectionate, emotionally close to or intimate with others – wife, partner, other women and other men
- Unable to find a good balance between commitment to work and commitment to family. There may be a tendency to overwork or be preoccupied with achievement and success
- Greater difficulty seeking help when needed.

In order to better manage our lives, it is important to grow in awareness of those conscious and unconscious influences that shape and mould us. Gender is one such influence.



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