Mental Health for Men

Common Problems ~ Practical Solutions

by John Ashfeld PhD
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IMPORTANT NOTE

The information and ideas in this book are not intended as a substitute for medical or other forms of professional assessment, diagnosis, treatment, or therapy. Some of the information contained here will, over time, be subject to change due to advances in knowledge and changes in population health. In cases of physical or mental health difficulties, information and advice from a qualified medical practitioner should always be sought.

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Contents

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................................................................. 7
True, False, and Somewhere In-between ........................................................................................................................................ 8
Getting Down to Basics about Mental Health .................................................................................................................................. 9
Defining what is Meant by Mental Health Difficulty .......................................................................................................................... 10
Some ‘Home Truths’ about the Issue of Stigma .................................................................................................................................... 11
Work and Play: Achieving a Sustainable Ratio ..................................................................................................................................... 15
How to Avoid Being a Victim of Change ............................................................................................................................................ 18
Providing Leadership in a Time of Crisis ................................................................................................................................................ 20
Taking Care of Yourself After a Crisis .................................................................................................................................................. 21
Why Wild and Natural Places are Good for Your Head .......................................................................................................................... 23
Being Sociable is a Tonic for Mental Health .......................................................................................................................................... 25
Talking Sense about Men and Feelings .................................................................................................................................................. 27
‘Nip it in the Bud’: Stepping in Early with Personal Problems ....................................................................................................... 29
Is Counselling of Any Use to Men? ...................................................................................................................................................... 31
Why Experiencing Powerlessness can be Poison for Men’s Mental Health .............................................................................................. 32
Contents

Stress: The Predator Within ................................................................. 35
Good Sleep is Essential to Mental Health ........................................ 40
You Don’t Have to Live with an Anxiety Problem .............................. 43
Depression: What it is, and Why It Needs to be Taken Seriously ........ 46
Why Self-medication is a Bad Idea .................................................. 50
It’s Official: Fathers Too Can Experience Postnatal Depression .......... 58
Old and Grumpy Maybe, but Not Old and Depressed ....................... 60
Retirement and Mental Health: Waiting for God or Seizing the Day? ... 62
Time for Soul-Searching Over Men and Suicide .............................. 63
What Men Experiencing Suicidal Thoughts Need to Hear ................ 65
Loss and Grief: Men Often Grieve Differently to Women ................ 68
Learning How to Make Good Use of Anger ..................................... 71
Surviving Separation is a Mental Health Issue ............................... 72
The Thorny Issue of Succession: A Hidden Mental Health Difficulty .... 75
Emergency Mental Health Numbers ................................................. 76
This book deals with a range of topics important to male mental health, as well as some basic self-help strategies. But in case that sounds a bit tame, keep reading because it also dares to challenge several popular myths and stereotypes about male mental health, and tackles some hotly debated issues such as how we understand mental health, and the tendency of some mental health commentators, mental health professionals, and the mass media to unnecessarily medicalise mental health difficulties. The book also touches on the issue of services for men: how difficult it can be sometimes for men to obtain appropriate and confidential professional support when they need it.

Mental health difficulties mentioned in the book are those that are termed high prevalence difficulties – those that are most common and that affect a significant percentage of the male population. Less common and usually more serious mental health difficulties are not discussed here, both because they represent a quite small percentage of mental health difficulties overall, and because they have a degree of complexity that is best read about in more detail than space here allows.

Though this is clearly a book written for men, it will doubtless be of interest to women too: women who care about men, and whose own health and wellbeing is of course inseparable from that of the men in their lives.
There are more mental health difficulties amongst men than women
*The prevalence of mental disorder amongst men is approximately equal to that of women*

Men suffer from more depression than women
*Twice as many women experience depression compared with men*

After disaster situations (like bushfires and floods) men suffer more from PTSD than women
*In general, at least twice as many women experience PTSD compared with men*

Men attempt suicide at a higher rate than women
*Women attempt suicide at a higher rate than men, but most men succeed on their first attempt*

Men don’t seek help when they experience mental health difficulties
*When services that know how to engage with men are available and accessible to men, men do use them; men do seek help*

If more men sought help with depression less of them would go on to end their lives
*In many cases men who kill themselves do not have a depression or any history of depression or any other serious mental health difficulty. Many men who do kill themselves are experiencing situational distress, the significance of which may be overlooked if the emphasis of prevention is on depression or serious mental health difficulties*

If men would seek help with mental health difficulties, they could easily receive professional support
*Most men are prepared to seek help where appropriate services are accessible and available, but in places – especially rural and regional areas, male friendly services often don’t exist, and standard mental health services (if they exist) may have long waiting lists and/or exclusionary eligibility criteria*

Antidepressants reduce the incidence of suicide
*Current evidence does not suggest that anti-depressants have an effect in reducing the risk of suicide attempts or completions*

Current mental health campaigns that focus on reducing the stigma of mental health difficulties make things better for sufferers
*There is still no convincing evidence to support this assertion. In fact, in some cases, because of their use of negative illness labels and language, such campaigns may prove to have made things more difficult for sufferers.*
‘...not only are things not what they seem, they are not even what they are called’

Francisco de Quevedo

There is no getting away from the fact that a significant number of men will experience mental health difficulties. For any man for whom this is true, ignorance is not bliss, it can lead to misery or even tragedy. But we have a lot of work to do as a society around this issue. We use unnecessary illness labels and wonder why there is stigma. We talk of the need for mental health literacy, yet we use mystifying language. We complain about a lack of male help-seeking, yet we don’t make help available in a way that respects male experience or appreciates that they are not women.

This book deals simply with key topics of men’s mental health, without ducking and weaving to avoid difficult issues.

John A. Ashfield PhD is a bestselling author, psychotherapist and educator widely recognised for his contribution to male health promotion, and the fields of male psychology and mental health.

Dr Ashfield is a Director of the Australian Institute of Male Health and Studies, and a member of the Executive Board of New Male Studies: An International Journal.