

be resilient

A publication of the Employee Assistance Centre

Shifting the narrative – men and mental health

Only around 30 per cent of people who use mental health services are men, yet men and women have similar rates of mental illness. Men also make up the majority of suicides and those dealing with substance abuse.

Why is it that men are less likely to seek help?

Narratives in mental health

“Narrative therapy basically says that many of the problems that we all have are fundamentally ‘storied’ through our experiences as we grow up in family contexts, in the larger cultural contexts – where gender shaping happens,” says George MacDonald, a counsellor with Manitoba Blue Cross’s Employee Assistance Program, who specializes in narrative therapy.

In the context of men’s mental health, this “storying” starts right from birth, says MacDonald.

“As you grow up, you’ll hear people tell boys that they shouldn’t cry, that if there’s some difficulty, they should ‘man up’ to deal with it,” he says.

It’s these negative experiences and expectations that combine to shape

men’s lives and affect how they deal with their mental health.

“The problem of gender storying for men is a major problem insofar as it’s never really talked about,” he says. “It’s different from women’s stories, because women have been very clear about how problems have been storied into their lives.”

Moving away from victim blaming

A 2018 report in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry outlines a change in how researchers are viewing men’s mental health. It reports that some practitioners are moving away from a “victim-blaming” approach that tends to attribute men’s mental health problems to men being stubborn or bottling up their concerns.

“Men often feel blamed for why things are going wrong, and that makes them reluctant, sometimes, to present themselves in counselling,” says MacDonald.

“You’ve heard people say, ‘Well, if men wouldn’t be so stubborn, if men wouldn’t have to manifest always being in charge or showing strength, or avoiding emotion, and

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being aggressive in what they do,” George says. “So, men do worry about being somehow identified as the problem, and what isn’t identified as the problem is the gender storying that influences how men should be.”

When MacDonald sees male clients in counselling, he takes extra care to not attribute their problems as their fault. Using the narrative approach, George works to help the person think of the problem as separate from themselves – as the adage goes, the problem, not the person, is the problem.

“So, if you can separate yourself from the problem and we can talk about the problem as if you’re a prisoner of it, that helps,” says MacDonald.

Men’s mental health versus women’s mental health

While both men and women experience a lot of the same

problems, MacDonald finds men often discuss issues related to success more often.

“They’ll have a job, they look after their family, they’re moving up the ladder of success, but something is bothering them,” says MacDonald. “And so, trying to find out what the problem is can sometimes be overlaid with a lot of discussion about success.”

These problems help contribute to the significantly higher rates of drug abuse in men.

According to 2018 figures from Statistics Canada, men were 1.5 times more likely to report heavy drinking than women.

Men also tend to experience depression differently than women, meaning depression in men may go unrecognized or undiagnosed and therefore untreated.

Another significant difference between men and women is their experience with mental health services. Research has shown that many men feel the mental health system is set up to cater to women’s preferences for face-to-face talk therapy. This structure, while popular, doesn’t create the opportunity for men to engage in ways that are often more comfortable and come more naturally to them. Socially, women are most likely to engage with others through conversation and with their body oriented to face the other person. Men on the other hand are more inclined to sit or stand next to one another and often opt to mix talk with task-oriented activity.

Improving mental health care for men

The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry’s report also outlines alternate methods of mental health treatment aimed specifically at men, including “men’s sheds,” where men work side-by-side on tasks such as woodworking.

“I think it’s a great development because it flies directly in the face of the gender-shaping idea of men acting as lone wolves in the world,” says MacDonald. “It very much shows up as a community of concern for other

men; a place where men can actually show emotional sensitivity to other men and be supported. Men can certainly use lots more of that.”

An additional benefit of alternative settings for men’s therapy is that they create an environment that may be more comfortable for men than the conventional face-to-face setting of a therapy room. Whether in the form of a “men’s shed” or simply acknowledging that focusing on talk and emotional vulnerability or “opening up” may not fit for all men, ideas about how men receive mental health services are changing. Dated ideas about men as “stubborn”, “poor communicators”, or having a tendency to “bottle things up” are not only past their expiration date, but they also often create barriers to men accessing mental health services. This is because men who have been assigned these labels are likely to expect to be similarly pigeon-holed by a mental health professional, rather than seen as a person with a story and not a stereotype. A more informed point of view is one that recognizes the storying that creates differences in the ways men and women cope with distress and seek help rather than blaming the victim.

Counselling support from Manitoba Blue Cross

Manitoba Blue Cross’s Employee Assistance Program counsellors come from a diverse array of backgrounds and clinical specializations, including men’s mental health. Our clinical intake team is here to assist clients by matching their needs with the appropriate counsellor for the best fit.

If you’re experiencing mental health concerns, reach out for help.

Manitoba Blue Cross members with Employee Assistance Program or Individual Assistance Program coverage can get counselling support.

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca.

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