

A person wearing a light-colored hoodie and blue trousers is walking away from the camera on a set of railway tracks. The tracks are surrounded by gravel and some sparse vegetation. In the background, there are bare trees, utility poles, and a cityscape under a cloudy, overcast sky. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

emale

improving male health & wellbeing
issue 167 August September 2018

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Men battling the Stigma of Loneliness

Sharing in an interview that he never told anyone because he felt ashamed, the former Surgeon General of the US Vivek Murthy spoke of his youthful loneliness. He believed at the time that admitting how he felt was like admitting he wasn't worth being loved. That stigma, still so firmly attached for most of us, has made it easier to disclose our depression or anxiety than to admit to being lonely. Maybe because it feels like the most wretched character flaw if no one wants to be your friend. But loneliness is not a reflection of worth. It's a state of mind with feelings of emptiness and being separate from others. There's no single cause or fix. Yet the strategies that can help — sharing feelings and spending time with others — can be the hardest to access when you already feel cut off.

Both genders are just as likely to suffer from this perception of social isolation, but it often can be harder to find the way out of the chasm if you were discouraged from expressing any vulnerability growing up. And if alleviating loneliness relies on asking for help, men are likely at a disadvantage.

Boomer men are making progress, though slowly. Both men and women need connections, of course, although their approach can be widely different. Women's friendships are often described as face-to-face, while men's tend to be shoulder-to-shoulder. Author and baby boom blogger, Brent Green said that guys spending time together aren't necessarily sharing feelings, though. But men who learned to be stoic at an early age may find it harder if they feel alone. "I think men may be unclear on how to go about making friends. It's something we don't teach boys growing up. I was raised to pursue a woman for a date, but I was never taught to pursue a man to be a friend." And it doesn't get easier when men get married and have a family. "They often feel they don't have the option to keep up with their friendships. They're expected to work hard, be productive and spend time with their family. That doesn't always leave time for friends." People used to value being connected. We knew we couldn't survive without it, but now our values have shifted to being individual and independent. There's a cultural feeling that we should be able to take care of ourselves and not be needy. Even if we enjoy being with other people it shouldn't look like we need the connection.

As our lifespans are nearly doubling, will we be ready with supportive relationships to help navigate the journey? According to Tamara Sims, director of the Sightlines Project at Stanford University's Center on Longevity and their recently released report, we have some work to do. Analyzing data on financial security, healthy living and social engagement, they looked at what will be needed to live long and well. Responses from 1995 and 2012 were compared on interpersonal connections with friends, family and neighbours, work, religious and community participation, and volunteering. One unsettling discovery was that boomers aged 55 to 64 were significantly less socially engaged than the same age group was in 1995. And for both men and women aged 45 to 74, there was a decline in friend support. As we get older, though, we're going to need more support, not less. Sims said that what has become clear is that we need to focus on social engagement as clearly as we have on our healthy living and financial security components. Even if you have friends, you may have to relearn how to make new ones. Couples split, people move, and one of the sadder consequences of growing older is that loss will be an inevitable part. Yet as we grow older, we want genuine friends. "Friendships in our 20s were often based just on having fun together, but today they're tested with life's heartaches".



Men battling the Stigma of Loneliness

If you're a man struggling with loneliness or would like to have more friends to share in life, here are three suggestions to get started:

1. Make it a priority. "We need to establish social connection habits in the same way we have for being healthy or financially secure," said Amy Yotopoulos, director of the mind division at the Stanford Center on Longevity. "Start by making friendships a priority, not just when you have the time."
2. Broaden your horizons. "Diversify your social portfolio like your financial one. If your wife plans all the social activities, what will you do if something happens to her? Start taking an active part,"
3. Use technology. "We need to intentionally leverage technology," said Sims. One of its biggest advantages is the ability to provide interactions when we can't leave the house or when we live in places that are more isolated.

Men are more comfortable doing things together, so choose something you enjoy and then ask a man to join you, even if it's watching a sport on television. Men may have to fight harder to get through the stigma of feeling alone. C.S. Lewis once said true friendship is born when we can say to another: "What! You too? I thought I was the only one." Remember that. Because you're never the only one. And that's the profound joy of connection.

By Debbie Reslock

Debbie Reslock is a freelance writer who specializes in aging issues and the 55+ market. As a former caregiver, she's also an advocate for aging-in-place whenever possible and person-centered long term care when it isn't. She's on the board of directors for the Colorado Culture Change Coalition and lives in Evergreen, Colo.

2018 AMHF Men's Health Awards Open

The 2018 AMHF Men's Health Awards will be presented at National Men's Health Gathering Dinner on Tuesday 13 November 2018 at the Novotel Parramatta, NSW. These prestigious Awards will honour those who have made an outstanding contribution to the men's health field.

The awards categories are:

- Significant contribution made by an individual to improve men's health and wellbeing
- Significant contribution made by a group or organisation to improve men's health and wellbeing
- Significant contribution made by an individual to improve Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander male health and wellbeing
- Significant contribution made by a group or organisation to improve Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander male health and wellbeing
- Significant contribution to improving the health and wellbeing of young men and boys
- Significant contribution to designing, developing or delivering male-friendly services

Nomination Information is on the [website](#) and nominations close on Monday 1st October 2018.



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Report from National Suicide Prevention Conference

The annual National Suicide Prevention Conference, hosted by Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA), took place in Adelaide this year (23rd to 26th 2018).

As most readers of EMALE will know, suicide kills eight people a day in Australia and six of them are male. It is the leading killer of men and boys under 45 and costs the the Australian economy an estimated \$13.75B a year.

As the peak body for men's health, the Australian Men's Health Forum (AMHF) is committed to pushing the issue of male suicide up the public and political agenda. In the past two years, some of the actions we have taken include:

- Commissioning and publishing a position paper on the need for male-friendly approaches to suicide prevention
- Taking a stand at the SPA national conferences in 2017 and 2018 to promote the concept of male-friendly approaches to the suicide prevention sector
- Joining SPA as a member to help us advocate for a greater focus on male suicide
- Supporting the National Male Suicide Prevention Conference held in 2017

Making male suicide a key issue in our [#KnowYourManFacts](#) awareness campaign

One of the key features of suicide prevention in Australia and globally, is that most of the work done in this field is "gender blind" and so fails to take into account the specific needs of men and women.

Attending last year's SPA conference helped AMHF to start making the case for a greater focus on male-friendly approaches to suicide prevention. In the past 12 months, we successfully advocated for the inclusion of more speakers on male suicide, which was the topic of two "All About Men" sessions at this year's conference. We were also pleased to see Jorgen Gullestrup of MATES In Construction presented with an award at the conference dinner for Excellence in Leadership. MATES is one of the best examples of a strengths-based, male-friendly approach to suicide prevention being put into practice that we know of, anywhere in the world.

Other award winners included Babana Aboriginal, which runs monthly men's groups in Sydney; Joe Williams of The Enemy Within, a regular speaker at men's health events around the country and Danielle Miller whose media work has included a focus on masculinity and male suicide. In conclusion, while there is not nearly enough focus on male suicide in the suicide prevention suicide or at the SPA conferences, there are some signs of progress and AMHF will continue to engage with the sector and advocate for more time, money and energy to be invested in male suicide prevention.

To find out more about AMHF's work in this area see: <http://www.amhf.org.au/suicide>.

By Glen Poole, Development Officer, Australian Men's Health Forum



Boys have closer bonding than girls



Forget the mean girls, according to a new study boys are more ‘cliquey’ than girls. They also are said to form close bonds since school.

For all those who are wondering what a clique is, it is used to describe a group of individuals who exclusively interact with one another and do not allow outsiders to be a part of the group. According to a finding published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, factors such as location and timetable may have an impact on the social networks that children develop.

Boys form thicker bonds and do not, leave the group very easily. Friendships or healthy emotional connect with people is a protective factor against depression and also in other mental illnesses. People with good friendships have better prognosis when they are stressed, than people who have low social contact. “Social mixing patterns are commonly used in mathematical models of infectious disease which can play a vital role in public health planning, such as determining effective vaccination strategies. Children’s mixing patterns are recognised as particularly important, as they represent a key risk group for disease transmission. As school is the primary location for many of their interactions, understanding how children socialise there is vital,” the study suggested.

The researchers from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and the University of Cambridge in the UK examined the features and structure of children’s social networks within different schools. The finding is the result of a study into UK school children’s real-life social networks by The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in partnership with the University of Cambridge. During the course of research, the study found that boys were more likely to form ‘tight-knit bonds’ than girls and stuck to this group throughout their school years. The study noted that the friendships among girls were more varied.

“Previous studies have typically looked at social interactions over a single day, so there has been limited information available on how much variation there might be in social mixing patterns over time in schools,” said Adam Kucharski, lead author at LSHTM.

“Showing boys are potentially more cliquey than girls, perhaps is going against gender stereotypes, and that popular children remain popular over time, is an interesting social insight; but for mathematical modellers, this type of information is also extremely valuable,” said Kucharski.

It's Time to Stop Blaming Men for Their Mental Health Woes

Many mental health campaigns consistently encourage people to spend more time talking. These campaigns consider talking as a sign of emotional literacy and essential to the development of positive mental health and psychological resilience. This encouragement to talk is commonly deployed when discussing men's mental health, where men are frequently stereotyped as self-destructively silent, stubborn and stoical in the face of mental health issues.

For example, the Australian national mental health campaign 'Beyond Blue' starts its men's mental health web-page with the sentence 'men are known for bottling things up'. Likewise, recent media articles on men's mental health focus on men's alleged taciturnity, with accusatory titles such as 'men need to talk about their mental health' or 'not talking about mental health is literally killing men' ([link is external](#)). In this discourse, men themselves are implicitly blamed for their mental health woes. 'If only men would talk more, their mental health would improve and their problems would be solved' or so the argument goes. However, such a simplistic rendering of the issue is highly problematic for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, it glosses over growing evidence that social context is a key determinant of mental health. Secondly, it blames the victim, further contributing to a lack of empathy and understanding. Thirdly, it ignores much research indicating that there are different modalities of mental health healing, many of which are action-based rather than talk-based. The amassed research indicates that social factors (rather than taciturn men) play a key role in the development and persistence of men's mental health problems. For example, male suicide and substance abuse rates tend to be highest in rural areas with high unemployment and declining industries. This can lead to a lack of hope, meaning and purpose for many men, especially unskilled and less-educated ones.

Other research indicates that negative life transitions can have a very harmful effect on men's mental health. Well-researched factors include redundancy, divorce and bereavement, especially when this is sudden and unexpected. False accusations and subsequent investigations can also have a very damaging effect on men's mental health. Common across these factors is a process of shock, loss and the subsequent experience of an existential (and financial) vacuum. This concrete negative social experience is often the root cause of men's mental health issues and focusing on men's alleged inability to 'open-up' conveniently ignores these underlying social issues.

As stated, many men's mental health campaigns focus attention on men's supposed silence and reticence to discuss problems. This can lead to a harmful narrative that blames and berates men for their mental health woes, implying that their own behavior is the root cause. This approach is known as 'victim-blaming' in public health, and is studiously avoided in women's mental health campaigns, where social context is often acknowledged as a key determinant of mental health.

Indeed, my own research indicates that media portrayals of women with mental illness tend to be much more empathic and sympathetic than portrayals of men with mental illness, which tend to be harsh and punitive. Famed Stanford University Professor Philip Zimbardo rightly calls this an 'empathy gap', where societal sympathy for men is in short supply. This empathy gap manifests itself in various ways. Interestingly, numerous men in my own research studies have noted that they have tried talking about their mental health issues, but few men or women in their social circle have been prepared to listen. Some even report that family and friends have simply told them to 'man-up', or worse still ostracized them as black sheep.

University of Missouri Professor Amanda Rose has conducted considerable research comparing male and female orientations to talking, concluding that males often 'don't see talking about problems to be particularly useful... men may be more likely to think talking about problems will make the problems feel bigger and engaging in different activities will take their mind off the problem'

Indeed, much research suggests that many men prefer action-based modalities of healing over talk-based modalities. This includes regular exercise, which has been shown to effectively reduce depressive symptoms. Likewise religious and traditional healing ([link is external](#)) based on prayer, ritual or ceremony can be effective in improving men's mental health, especially for minority, immigrant and aboriginal men.

It's Time to Stop Blaming Men for Their Mental Health Woes

Some action-oriented mental health services specifically target men. One of these is known as 'men's sheds'; places where isolated and lonely men can go to create, repair or make things- finding camaraderie, solace and support in the process. Men's sheds build on men's strengths, and its motto contains much wisdom: 'men don't talk face-to-face, they talk shoulder-to-shoulder'.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to mental health issues. Therefore an inclusive mental health system must offer different modalities of healing. For some men, face-to-face talking can lead to helpful comfort and support: 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. For others, it can lead to painful brooding and rumination: 'do not reopen old wounds'. For the latter, action-based modalities of healing may be more effective.

Clinicians must elicit preferences, offer a variety of choices and work with the grain when interacting with individual male patients. Indeed, men who are berated and blamed for being 'in denial' or stubbornly silent may actually be engaging in a well-honed strategy of distraction and resilience. This strategy may have evolved after failed efforts to discuss mental health issues with others, a sad manifestation of the empathy gap that permeates wider society.

Indeed, solving the men's mental health crisis involves changes at various levels. But currently, too much emphasis is being put on changing men's supposed silence, and not enough on changing society and changing the mental health services that are meant to serve the whole of society.

[Rob Whitley, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at McGill University and a research scientist at the Douglas Hospital Research Centre.](#)

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For more information contact Greg on M 0417 772 390 or e greg@menshealthservices.com.au



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2018 National Men's Health Gathering



Follow all the latest updates on our Twitter feed [@MensHealthAMHF](https://twitter.com/MensHealthAMHF)

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This is your chance to help shape the future of male health policy in Australia by hearing the latest research, best practices and case studies. With multiple opportunities to network with researchers, practitioners and experts from across Australia, we can 'Work Together to Improve Male Health and Wellbeing'.

For further information about the [2018 National Men's Health Gathering](https://www.menshealthgathering.org.au), please visit the official conference website at www.menshealthgathering.org.au.

Alternatively, you can contact GEMS Event Management Australia on +61 2 9744 5252 or send an email to 2018 National Men's Health Gathering Project Manager, Rebecca Nguyen at rnguyen@gemsevents.com.au.