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improving male health & wellbeing
issue 165 April May 2018



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As phrases such as “man up” and “only girls cry” continue to permeate the public vernacular, some men may feel pressure to put on a brave face as they struggle to stay abreast of their work, bills, family and social life. Fortunately, this trend is gradually changing, notes psychologist and current PhD student at the University of Sydney, **Zac Seidler**, who says that an increasing number of men are seeking psychological help to guide them through tough times.

“Given the push by leading national organisations like BeyondBlue and Headspace, the stigma around mental health treatment is slowly being challenged. The conversation about what mental illness looks like and feels like, even among men, is getting steadily louder against a backdrop of what was decades of forced silence,” says Seidler.

Although many more men may be reaching out for help, increased access is not translating into what we would expect – that is, improved mental health outcomes – warns Seidler, whose desire to improve the mental health of men stems from his personal experience. Following the death of his father, Dr Raymond Seidler, who struggled with depression for much of his life, the young Seidler was driven to search for answers – to try and prevent other men from facing a similar predicament – making sure that the suicide epidemic among men in Australia is targeted head on.

Seidler, along with an international team comprising Dr Haryana Dhillon – a research fellow at The University of Sydney with a strong focus on reducing barriers to help-seeking, Dr Simon Rice, a clinical psychologist and research fellow with Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health; Professor John Oliffe, the founder of the Men’s Health Research program at The University of British Columbia; and Professor John Ogradniczuk, director of the psychotherapy program in the Department of Psychiatry at The University of British Columbia, have created a research project called Man Island that seeks to explore the positive and negative experiences of men who have engaged with psychological treatment.

No Man Is an Island – welcome to man therapy

Men still account for three quarters of suicides in Australia, says Seidler, and available data indicates that those who take their own lives often seek professional help beforehand. “The reason the suicide rate isn’t shifting is because once we get men into treatment, we’re not keeping them there,” Seidler remarks.

“Good therapy should be moulded to the needs of the client, and it turns out that many men aren’t willing, don’t know, or aren’t asked what they want out of therapy.” Having looked into gender differentiation in the methods employed for suicide attempts, Seidler says that “the fact that men use more lethal methods to suicide is just another reflection of dominant masculinity saying ‘get it done,’ ‘don’t let anyone help you,’ and if these voices are confronted early and purposefully in therapy, we might have less unnecessary deaths in our communities”.

The team’s project works to better understand how men access, engage and improve in treatment, and emphasises the need for clinicians to tailor their approach to address the needs of men. “For too long, men have been blamed for their poor outcomes in mental health treatment, but maybe it’s now time that treatment moulds to men, rather than vice versa. When it comes to understanding men, that implies understanding gender and the way men exist in this world,” notes Seidler.

Through the team’s research, extensive interviews with 20 men who have received treatment for depression revealed that, according to Seidler, an action-oriented approach – one that focuses on strengths, problem solving, skill-building and masculine traits like risk-taking and action orientation – as distinct from deep talk therapy may be a more effective means to engage men in therapy in the initial stages. “‘Getting things done’ and making progress was a key theme in our research, and rather than seeing this as a masculine ‘problem’, it’s time we embrace it as a strength and use it to our advantage,” explains Seidler. “If someone were a really fast runner, you wouldn’t force them to swim. We need to be building up that skill set, that speed, in mental health treatments and run along side them, not make them learn a completely different way to be. It’s a matter of fine-tuning.” The action-oriented approach can engender feelings of strength and empowerment in men, the research found.

“Whether it is for men or women, treatment is not a one-size-fits-all product, we need to listen and adapt to each person that walks through that door,” says Seidler. In the next phase of Man Island, the team is aiming to create a training program for clinicians on how to better engage men with depression in psychological treatment, which will be applicable for clinicians utilising a range of therapeutic approaches. “It will hopefully reduce dropout rates in treatment and down the line, effect the staggering male suicide rate,” says Seidler.

“It takes a male-friendly approach to psychological treatment which is historically feminine in its style, by focusing heavily on gender and the differences among men ... The aim is to broaden our reach with this program and train as many clinicians as possible.” The researchers are currently taking donations to fulfil this goal, so that more men don’t lose their lives to mental illness. “It will have a heavy focus on masculinity and its impact on diagnosing, treating and communicating with male clients to keep them coming back,” enthuses Seidler.

“Man Island is a response to a crisis, a world first in men’s mental health research where we will aim to change treatment to be truly ‘man made’.” **While the project may seem like one small step for man, it could represent one giant leap for the mental health of mankind.**

Donations to the Man Island project can be made at www.manisland.com.au or manisland@sydney.edu.au



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Waking up to Boys' Literacy



An elbow in the ribs again. 'Dad!' says my daughter, frustrated that I've fallen asleep yet again. I'm supposed to be reading *her* to sleep. I always chose three short books to read at bedtime, rather than one long one, because of my tendency to kip. Of course, she usually wanted three long ones.

What a joy it was to read to my children. Now, to see them reading novels – my son devouring hefty tomes in just a few days – is equally satisfying. Listening to him talk about the discussions he has with his Year 11 Philosophy teacher about philosophical zombies, is wonderful. He has the words he needs to defend himself, to express his ideas, to communicate with skill.

Unfortunately, far too many Tasmanians, and far too many boys, lack sufficient literacy skills. The problem of boys falling behind girls in literacy results is a global issue. Girls experience fewer opportunities in some areas of life, and I believe that resolving those differences requires us to address areas of life where boys also lack opportunities.

Did you know that nearly a quarter (23%) of Year 4 boys score below the expected standard for literacy, compared with 15% of girls? 2016 research conducted by Roy Morgan also showed that boys are less likely than girls to say they enjoy reading (68%/82%), and to spend money on books (18%/28%). One in five boys lag behind their peers in literacy and numeracy, due to behavioural or emotional problems identified in the third grade. We know also that boys complete Year 12 and tertiary education at lower levels than girls, and that boys are far more often suspended or expelled. According to Dr Julie Moschion of the University of Melbourne, boys have been out-performed in literacy by girls for 50 years, Surely, it's time to do something about this?

We will see our whole community benefit if we can improve literacy for boys. Dr Moschion states that low literacy rates in boys risks future social disconnectedness, unemployment and criminality. Improving literacy in childhood is surely one of the most potentially powerful, truly preventive ways to address those issues. So how can we improve outcomes for boys, and our community? Typically, when we want men to change, we tell them to what to change, and how they should change it. But this approach lacks understanding about *how* people change. We need a new approach – a community response that is relational, psychologically safe, non-judgmental and full of empathy. We need to accept men and boys where they are, and give them the tools, support, and encouragement that will enable them to share a love of literacy and reading.

Waking up to Boy's Literacy

At a community level, there is much to do to encourage and enable dads to read to their kids – and to provide opportunities for boys to see other male role models spruiking the value of reading and literacy. Several years ago, a play centre in Burnie provided a 'rough and tumble' play space for dads and kids – an innovative idea at the time. The same kind of approach can facilitate better literacy. Let's add to those dad-friendly play areas with a space where dads can find information and resources about the benefits of reading to their sons and daughters – a place that facilitates, encourages and enables men to read to their children.

Studies by Dr Vaughan Cruikshank of the University of Tasmania highlight the waning numbers of male primary school and early childhood teachers. For the many children who don't have daily access to their dad or other good men, school and childcare are vital places where boys can see men engaging in, valuing and sharing reading and literacy. Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses and Child & Family Centres could create a dads' reading space during Men's Health Week, or in the lead up to Fathers' Day. And schools could promote a dads' reading day once a month.

The UK Literacy Trust took action on boys' literacy in 2012 by creating the Boys' Reading Commission. In addition to improving efforts at home and school, the Commission found that community-wide activities promoting male identities who valued learning and reading were also important. Professor Robyn Cox of the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, recently pointed to images of David Beckham reading, which were posted in UK bus shelters and other community spaces. Where is the Tasmanian David-Beckham-with-a-book who is willing to join with us and take a step towards improving literacy for boys?

Evidence shows that dads reading to their kids brings broad benefits, including improved cognitive function, resilience and moral judgment. A recent study at the Murdoch Children Research Institute (2017) showed that children who are read to by their dads at age two, showed better language development at age four. Dads come out ahead too, with improved self-confidence, attachment with children, and increased community participation, and reduced stress and substance use. What's not to like?

So dads, read to your children. Every day. As long as you can stay awake!

Jonathan Bedloe is a passionate advocate for the wellbeing of men and boys. He is Chair of Men's Resources Tasmania and the recently elected President of the Australian Men's Health Forum, and works in the Tasmanian community sector.



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MEN AND FAMILIES

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MEN'S HEALTH WEEK

11-17 JUNE 2018

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This resource is supported by funding provided by the Australian Government Department of Health

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ENGAGING MEN EFFECTIVELY combines evidence based theory and practice with a focus on developing individual awareness, knowledge and interpersonal and group skills. The program is inclusive of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers' health, wellbeing and cultural needs. Each training program is tailored towards the participants individual areas of interest

Click [here](#) for Engaging Men Effectively Program Content

COST

Cost per program \$600 for 2 days of training, lunch and refreshments, all resources and ongoing support, an early bird rate of \$500 is offered until April 16.

All training materials plus a comprehensive bank of men's health reports, articles and resources including a copy of my book "*Men's health and wellbeing: an a – z guide*" are supplied on completion of the course. Ongoing follow up will be provided and all training course participants will be invited to be a part of an ongoing network for future support in their work with men and boys.

To register click on [Registration Form](#)

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

Toxic masculinity: Will the 'war on men' only backfire?

When news broke of singer-songwriter George Michael's death on Christmas Day, social media was flooded with tributes to a man whose chart-topping music helped define the 1980s.

But the English pop star was also remembered for the way he "dared to do manhood differently", and the license he gave others to express their gender identity on their own terms. Michael's death — just months after the passing of gender-bending artists David Bowie and Prince — was particularly poignant, some pointed out, because 2016 had been a year in which so-called "toxic masculinity reigned".

In 2016 when toxic masculinity reigned, devastating to lose Prince, Bowie & George Michael, who showed there's no one right way to be a man. The term 'toxic masculinity' has crept into the lexicon in the past 12 months, having appeared in mainstream news articles, popular feminist blogs and, as of November, the crowd-sourced online repository of slang words, Urban Dictionary. Generally used to denote how some aspects of masculinity — such as entitlement, homophobia and sexual aggressiveness — can harm women and families and cripple men's own health, toxic masculinity, at its most extreme edges, has been linked with acts of violence like mass shootings and university campus sexual assault. It has also been used to describe the behaviour of US President Donald Trump.

In the lead-up to the election, numerous media outlets around the world published articles suggesting Mr Trump's 'toxic masculinity' — as exemplified by his "male privilege and excess" and his disdain for women — was symptomatic of a broader sickness afflicting American men. For example, when Mr Trump dismissed as "locker room talk" his remarks about grabbing women's genitals, the creator of TV series *Transparent* Jill Soloway lamented how "toxic masculinity" was perpetuating "man club" culture, allowing men to degrade and disrespect women.

"When people say, Boys will be boys and this is just the way it is," Soloway wrote at TIME magazine, "I know that's not true. This. Can. Change." Writing in the New York Times, Jared Yates Sexton of Georgia Southern University claimed Mr Trump's toxic masculinity — "his macho-isms, his penchant for dividing the world into winners and losers, his lack of empathy for anyone but himself" — was preventing "especially the white men who make up a majority of Mr Trump's base" from expressing their emotions. As a result, Sexton argued, men were dying needlessly from lifestyle diseases and suicide.

And at the recent Women's March on Washington, a rally for which hundreds of thousands of demonstrators gathered to express their concern that women's and other minority groups' rights will be eroded under President Trump, many carried placards emblazoned with references to 'toxic masculinity'. "I came here to march against a toxic masculinity and years of misogyny," Washington DC resident Andrew told TIME of his motivation for marching. "After all, I got six sisters. I had to do this."



Toxic masculinity: Will the 'war on men' only backfire?

But while some experts say the term's ubiquity represents progress in gender relations because it acknowledges how gender norms and inequality can impact men too, others argue it's an antagonistic expression that vilifies and disempowers men. How, they ask, could attacking masculinity possibly foster better relations between the sexes? Surely crying 'toxic masculinity' will only alienate men and undermine feminism's aim of recruiting mass support?

"But this phrase 'toxic masculinity' is new, and its explicit critique of traditional masculinity is new as well." But as much as the conversation about 'toxic masculinity' appears to be uniting people, it is also dividing; the term is typically met with fierce backlash, often on social media, from those who find it offensive.

For example, a recent article about [trends in men's pet ownership](#) (by this author) that mentioned 'toxic masculinity' drew [hundreds of angry comments](#) on the ABC News Facebook page.

Many people argued it was an "insulting" term that "infers that being masculine is a bad thing". "This war on masculinity will only backfire," wrote one commenter. "Men built the roads, cars, buildings, elevators, stairs. We might go on strike. Build your own stuff."

For [John Macdonald, Director of the Men's Health Information and Resource Centre at Western Sydney University](#), the backlash is a matter of semantics. "Why use that inflated language?" Professor Macdonald said. "To say 'toxic masculinity' — it does imply ... that all men are toxic. "Clearly there is such a thing as toxicity in some of the ways that men are socialised, but to suggest that all masculinity is toxic and that all men are violent is completely wrong."

Part of the problem, Professor Macdonald suggests, is that masculinity "has received such a bashing" in both academia and the media in recent years. For example, the emphasis on curbing domestic violence in the community is important and "understandable", he said, but when men as a whole are blamed for some men's bad behaviour, it makes it "very hard to talk about non-toxic masculinity" and the positive sides of being a man. Catharine Lumby, a professor of media at Macquarie University who researches gender and media, said she doesn't use the term 'toxic masculinity' because it is "inflammatory".

Still, she thinks the backlash against it is symptomatic of a broader anxiety among white men, many of whom are currently grappling with challenges such as unemployment and the loss of identity that can trigger — issues Mr Trump has promised he will address as President. "We are living in a world which is globalised and multicultural and diverse and [many white working class men in the US] are really struggling with a loss of power" and a sense that "they don't own the world anymore", Professor Lumby said. Indeed, research suggests many Trump voters are concerned about what they perceive as a 'weakening' of America.

Source: [Hayley Gleeson](#)

20 things that make men awesome.

#13 Being non-emotional.

Being able to separate yourself from your emotions is not a feminine quality. There are many times when being non-emotional is not only desirable but critical. If we are ever attacked, I want a man who separates his feelings and lets his brain take over instead of his heart.

Hearts are awesome, but sometimes when you go with your heart, everyone ends up getting hurt or killed. Although one of the reasons that people think there is a such a thing as toxic masculinity, it is the very thing most critical for us and our survival.

By [JULIE KEATING](#)