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A Call to Strengthen Men's Mental Health

The Jed Foundation

Note

The information and recommendations captured in this report are based on research that has primarily measured the experiences of adults (over the age of 18) who identified as male. For purposes of consistency, this paper will refer to this group as men or males. Although some programs and research referenced in this article may be inclusive of adolescent males, the report largely draws from findings and data focused on adult populations. That said, adolescents are intertwined in the same cultural ecosystem as their older counterparts, so many of the topics discussed in this report should be relevant to this age group as well.

Additionally, The Jed Foundation (JED) acknowledges the differences between sex and gender, and affirms the fact that each individual experiences their gender identity in unique ways. JED recognizes that the cultural framework around masculinity that this report draws from skews heavily toward experiences from individuals acclimated to modern Western societies and who are predominantly cisgender, meaning that their gender identity aligns with their birth sex.

While JED honors the robust complexity of the morphing meaning of "manhood," most men in these societies receive dominant cultural scripts about gender expression that shape how they perceive, experience, acknowledge, and express emotions and need for support—informal and formal. The recommendations below are mindful of this cultural context which has influenced the research and content made available for review.

The Need to Prioritize Men's Mental Health

As understanding of the role mental health plays in individual and collective well-being grows, it is critical to acknowledge that men face unique challenges. The basic facts surrounding men's mental health are alarming, particularly when juxtaposed with women's mental health. For example:

- More than six million men in the United States suffer from depression, although this is likely much less than the true prevalence given that male depression is largely underdiagnosed and men are less likely to seek treatment.[1]
- About 20% of male college students stated that there is no one in their lives they are comfortable confiding to when stressed or anxious.[2]
- Compared to women, men are two to three times more likely to misuse drugs.[3]
- About one in every four men over 18 reported binge drinking in the previous month, and one in every five men will report an alcohol dependency during their lifetimes.[4]
- Men died by suicide more than three times as often as women in 2019. Nearly 70% of those who died by suicide in 2019 were white men.[5] This increase is particularly notable in Black men where, between 1991 and 2019, suicide attempts increased 162.4%, more than any other subgroup.[6]

Statistics such as these likely represent a limited portrait of the challenges faced by men, given that men oftentimes "suffer in silence" or elect not to seek professional help. Help-seeking in particular is an area of concern for men of color in the United States, where a significantly fewer percentage of men of color aged 18-44 report treatment utilization compared to white men.[7]

One reason that mental health challenges may be less noticed in men is that they are more likely than women to externalize their mental health challenges, meaning actions or problems are outwardly manifested and directed toward their environment.[8] In contrast, women are more likely to internalize maladaptive emotions or thoughts. This means that men are significantly more likely than women to engage in:

- Substance misuse[9]
- Suicide completion[10]
- School dropout[11]
- Physical violence (toward others and self-directed)[12]
- Intimate partner/domestic violence[13]
- Bullying[14]

These behaviors impact families, schools, communities, and institutions, so it is crucial to focus on the mental health of men. Understanding "why" lays the path for more effectively removing barriers and increasing key supports. This benefits men and society at large because when men lead happier and healthier lives, they are less likely to externalize distress and more available to give and receive support in personally and socially beneficial ways.

How Men Fare in Key Mental Health Competencies

Proactively understanding and taking steps to address mental health "red flags" on oneself and others requires several key competencies:

- Basic understanding of emotions and the role they play in well-being
- Being willing and able to seek help when needed
- A commitment and willingness to (pro)actively engage in the regular activities needed to safeguard well-being.

Ability in these three broad domains serve as important protective mechanisms:

1. Emotional literacy: This refers to the overall ability to understand and articulate one's own emotional experience as well as to empathize with others' emotions. To do this, individuals need to recognize and label both basic and more nuanced emotional states, allow and process challenging emotions, and recognize and support this experience in others. Emotional literacy is critical for positive mental health and is widely understood to enhance quality of life and support relationships.[15]

How men fare: On average, men consistently score lower on emotional intelligence measures compared to women (e.g., emotional recognition, regulation).[16] They are also less likely to be empathetic and emotionally dependent on intimate partners than women.[17] Research also shows that compared to their female counterparts, males are less likely to talk about emotional issues and are more likely to adhere to culturally and socially dictated "feeling rules;" for most men this requires some degree of stoicism.[18]

Moreover, despite strong evidence that strong social ties and emotional sharing and support can be a protective factor for mental health, men on average have fewer close confidants and less emotionally-based support networks compared to women, and are less likely to have one close confidant at all.[19] Interestingly, most pre-adolescent boys report close and intimate male friendships, but these types of relationships usually dissipate in later adolescence despite boys reporting continued desire for maintaining these interactions—suggesting powerful cultural and social pressures that discourage the continuance of a potentially key protective factor.[20] Overall, the effect of suppressing one's emotions in adulthood limits the opportunity for men to practice emotional literacy and receive the benefits that come from this exchange.

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2. Help-seeking awareness and behaviors: Being able to recognize basic signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, in oneself and others, is a critical part of knowing and seeking support when it is needed. This requires that one be educated about what mental health struggles look like (e.g., emotional withdrawal, chronic irritability, etc.), as well as a willingness to seek help from informal and formal sources when needed.

How men fare: While men may be as likely as women to be exposed to information about the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, a robust body of research shows that men possess significantly less favorable attitudes toward psychological help-seeking than women.[21] For example, college-aged men consistently report less interest in seeking care for behavioral issues and strong self-stigma toward help-seeking.[22] Young men also report higher perceived peer norms and negative pressure related to mental health help-seeking compared to women.[23] Men are also more likely than women to identify stigma as a factor in not seeking formal support.[24]

3. Adaptive and health-promoting behaviors: Supporting and sustaining positive mental health requires the capacity for and commitment to self-care and personal wellness, such as maintaining a healthy physical lifestyle, getting adequate sleep, and moderating substance use.

How men fare: Although men collectively skew more positively in some protective domains versus women, such as reporting lower levels of rumination and worry,[25] having higher self-esteem,[26] and benefiting more from exercise in reducing depressive symptoms,[27] there are several areas in which they fare worse when compared to women. For example, men are more likely than women to endorse the use of alcohol, sleeping pills, and other unhealthy coping strategies when they are struggling.[28]

They are also more likely to experience life interference from drugs and alcohol use, largely due to the fact that they tend to use these in greater quantities and experience greater adverse physical consequences as a result.[29] Men's social networks are often typically smaller and more homogenous than those of women, and these networks are less likely to be reported as emotionally supportive.[30]

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In short, men's lower rates of mental health care utilization, smaller and less diverse social networks, and lower propensity to divulge feelings to friends, family, and health care providers may predispose them to externalize their distress in the form of aggression, violence, or alcohol/substance use. The outward focused expression of distress not only has detrimental impacts for others, but often keeps men from asking for and receiving the support they need.

A Deeper Look into Masculinity and 'Man Box' Culture

When considering potential causal factors to explain these disparities, it is important to contextualize the current cultural pressures of manhood. By and large, there is still a strong societal pull for men in Western cultures to embody a "traditional" masculine identity (also known as "hegemonic masculinity").[31] This includes a tendency to strongly endorse:

- Self-reliance
- Restrictive emotionality
- Risk-taking
- Dominance

Although there are a few select subcategories of traditional masculinity that can serve as potential buffers, the general consensus is that those who report greater attachment to these values of traditional masculinity are more likely to make maladaptive health choices and report a lower willingness to seek psychological support.[32] Furthermore, the consistent pressure to make self-assessments between one's gender identity and the rigid normative expectations cast by society (a paradigm known as gender role strain) has been shown to exacerbate mental health outcomes.[33]

As such, American society today has largely constrained cisgendered men into a "man box,"[34] one that largely pressures them to place healthy attitudes and behaviors like open expressiveness and help-seeking outside of acceptable norms. Too often, healthy coping mechanisms and preventive self-care measures are sacrificed in the name of "manhood."

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What We Can Do

While the challenges presented above are concerning, there is growing cultural momentum to understand and address the social and psychological infrastructure impediments to fostering the skills and attitudes critical for positive mental health in men.

Breaking down cultural barriers and reshaping the masculine identity will require patience, but these gaps can be overcome with adequate understanding, positive counter-messaging, and an increase in available resources and avenues for support.

What is Currently Being Done

Current efforts targeted toward improving male mental health have been centered in the following domains:

1. Efforts to increase male **emotional literacy** and promote **help-seeking attitudes and behaviors** in the form of:
    a. Online/digital resources providing psychoeducation and self-assessment tools
        i. Example: HeadsUpGuys; Man Therapy
    b. Storytelling initiatives that model help-seeking and encourage de-stigmatization
        i. Example: The Good Men Project; Movember Real Stories
    c. Male-specific therapy directories to simplify care-seeking
        i. Example: The Men's List; Therapy for Black Men
    d. Prominent male celebrities/influencers leveraging their platforms to include discussions around mental health
        i. Example: **Prince Harry; Dwayne Johnson; Michael Phelps; Lauv**
2. The enhancement of male **social connectedness** through the creation of men's support groups and male-focused mentorship programs. These types of communities vary in format, but include:
    a. Virtual social groups that connect through online chats or social media
        i. Example: Young Black Men Project, Tethr; NextGenMen Boy's Club
    b. Physical support groups focused on guidance, shared dialogue, and mentorship

   i. Example: **Becoming a Man (BAM)**, **ManKind Project**; **HUMEN Space (UK)**; **Legends of Lawndale (Chicago)**

3. A particular organization-wide focus or initiative on mental health within communities where men are likely to associate —all four domains are emphasized, including the importance of **adaptive and health-promoting behaviors.** Examples include:
   a. Fraternities: **Pi Kappa Alpha Fraternity Online Resource**; **Omega Psi Phi (Brother, You're on My Mind)**
   b. Sports Teams: **Indianapolis Colts Kicking the Stigma Initiative (NFL)**; **NBA MindHealth Initiative**

Recommendations

The recommendations below are meant to provide a broad map for reducing barriers to care and enhancing mental health competencies in men, building upon efforts currently underway related to general awareness-raising, educational, and support programs and increasing the capacity of mental health professionals and peers to support men.

1. **Utilize a strengths-based, positive approach that affirms adaptive qualities of manhood:** Masculinity, particularly traditional norms revolving around aggression, risk-taking, and emotional masking, is generally perceived as detrimental to healthy outcomes. However, there are particular subsets of the masculine identity that research has shown to be adaptive to men's well-being, resulting in a framework focused on **positive masculinity**.[35] Qualities of positive masculinity include:
   a. Taking **personal responsibility** for one's behaviors[36]
   b. Believing in one's own **self-efficacy** and ability to **accomplish** prescribed goals in environments like work or school[37]
   c. **Valuing groups** formed around a shared purpose or activity
   d. Utilizing **humor** as a bonding and coping mechanism
   e. Explaining that **emotional control and balance** are signs of maturity[38]
   f. Emphasizing **bravery** and **courage**, particularly when overcoming an obstacle[39]
   g. Achieving a desired state of **"fitness,"** which incorporates endurance, resilience, flexibility, and strength[40]
   h. Knowing about the **possibility** of achieving a better future and internalizing how mental well-being can be an integral component to **one's desired state**[41]
2. **Continue to create spaces for social connectedness, both male-specific and non male-specific:** Having a strong social circle to promote open and transparent dialogue around mental health and emotional well-being is a critical component to attitude and behavior change. Not only can men receive the guidance and support that they need, they can also practice the skills that are necessary for emotional literacy and learn how to be better help-givers themselves.

Importantly, these spaces can and should take on a variety of formats in order to best meet pockets of men where they are located, whether that be online (e.g., chats, social media) or in different in-person settings (e.g., support groups, teams, associations).42

All types of social communities where men work or socialize should normalize the discussion of mental health and equip members with the knowledge and skills to promote a supportive culture. Organizational leaders should model these practices and invest in trainings, resources, and other support to ensure that men are surrounded by a community of care.

3. **Provide action-oriented and solution-focused guidance and recommendations:** In line with evidence from the literature that indicates that men on average respond more positively to more task-oriented, systemized approaches with defined-end goals, these initiatives utilize language that portray the acquisition of mental/emotional knowledge as an important **skill or strength**. As a result, the process of reaching out for support may seem less daunting and more digestible.[43]

4. **Present relatable, authentic role models:** There is strong evidence to support that men respond well to peers and prominent figures who have shared identities or interests.[44] In a domain like psychoeducation, which may not be commonly featured in everyday male-facing culture, who delivers this educational content is a critical component to literacy development. Men who feel supported and heard can serve as critical role models for other men, creating a cascade of social support and positive empowerment.

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Those who work directly in supporting males, including mental health professionals, peer advocates, and general community members, should be familiar with basic concepts surrounding masculinity and supportive approaches (i.e., strengths-based, action-oriented language) that resonate with men.

6. **Encourage continued academic interest and funding:** Research on clinical/public health messaging, interventions, and treatment focused on masculinity and male mental health should continue to be funded and promoted.

Conclusion

Existing efforts aimed at tackling this societal challenge have made significant impacts, but more can and should be done.

It is critical that we better understand the unique barriers that individuals identifying as men often face in understanding, talking about, and meeting their mental health needs. Existing efforts aimed at tackling this societal challenge have made significant impacts, but more can and should be done.

The Jed Foundation (JED) looks forward to working with champions and changemakers to drive awareness, amplify recommended practices, and promote evidence-based interventions and resources to bolster men's mental health. Together, we can build a culture where healthier and happier young men can contribute to stronger families, schools, workplaces, and communities.

About The Jed Foundation (JED)

JED is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We're partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We're equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We're encouraging community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health.

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