

# Help for men's mental health

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UKCP, explores real-life challenges that affect all our lives and how psychotherapy can help. This month, due to the groundswell of response to last month's Dossier on the emotional health of men in the 21st century, she outlines how therapy can literally be a lifeline for our menfolk



Recently, I published a piece of research about how men's crimes are represented in the media in contrast to the crimes of women. When men commit violent acts, they are said to 'snap', as if something beyond their control just clicked momentarily and they behaved a certain way. But, when you delve behind the headlines and examine the real people and their situations, the picture is usually that of long-term issues that have not been acknowledged or addressed. Now, before you accuse me of linking crime to mental health, I assure you there is plenty of evidence to show that men experiencing mental distress are actually far less likely to harm others – but they are more likely to harm themselves.

## Widespread misinformation

As someone who has a research interest in both the media and psychotherapy, I'm concerned about the potential impact of unrealistic messages about men's mental health. First, it is the media who typically associate men's mental health with violence, when the statistics suggest the opposite. No wonder men wish to keep their feelings under wraps.

Second, as a mother, partner and colleague, I am worried about the impact that the constant barrage of images portraying unattainable and 'ideal' masculinity is having on men. The stigma surrounding men's mental health is acute for all ages. Older men

raised amid traditional expectations of masculinity struggle to outwardly express any manifestation of distress. Meanwhile, younger men are exposed to idealised images of male beauty and prowess, as well as unrealistic sexualised material more than ever before.

When did we last see a man showing less-than-robust emotional health, or even crying, in mainstream media? Entrepreneur and inventor Elon Musk has been pilloried for opening up about his mental health, despite working 120-hour weeks trying to keep his companies on track. The men who are most admired in society – typically the famous, wealthy, successful and powerful – are not always ready to admit their struggles in public, and that can leave all men feeling apprehensive about speaking up.

It is certainly positive that Princes William and Harry have begun talking frankly about their own emotional challenges. They have opened a space for other high-profile male role models – footballers, actors and even the occasional CEO – to share their experiences, for the benefit of all men.

But not everyone is a billionaire. The reality for most men is that there is constant uncertainty about work, housing and whether they will be able to raise or support a family.

Part of the stigma that still exists about mental health for men is that men have greater difficulty talking about

their struggles than women. Those who speak up are extremely courageous, and it can be the hardest step to acknowledge that you need help.

## No more bottling up

A first step is to talk to someone you trust, whether that's a close friend, family member, or accredited psychotherapist. If that feels too difficult right now, seriously interrogate yourself about what the reasons for that may be. Reading the personal testimonies of men in the spotlight, who have spoken out on the subject, can be inspiring and affirming. It's also worth taking a non-judgemental audit of your lifestyle, whether that's nutrition, sleep, or the misuse of alcohol or other substances. Our behaviour can be unwittingly self-sabotaging, particularly if we are overworking or we feel under societal pressure to conform to habits that are not good for our health.

Instead of representations of six-packs, money and sexual prowess, let's associate masculine success with compassion, self-care and being bravely self-aware.

PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKEUP: CARL STANLEY

## ASK THE EXPERT...

Andy Cottom is a psychotherapist and trauma therapist offering support to people who have been affected by crime, war and other traumatic events



### Q What are the main obstacles for men in asking for support?

It's the ethos of 'boys don't cry'. It's extraordinary that somebody would take their own life, rather than admit he is in trouble, but the less practice we have talking about our feelings, the harder it is to open up when despair hits. By not talking, we isolate ourselves: 'I am lonely but I am behaving like a man is supposed to...'

who isn't going to judge you or think it strange to have difficult emotions. (See 'How to find a therapist' below.) By all means, open up to your friends, too – you would be surprised how many feel the same way but did not want to be the first to admit it.

### Q How can therapy help men in the long term?

I've heard so many men say they wish they had spoken up sooner. Sometimes, they've lived with a trauma silently for 40 years, for fear that no one would understand what they have been through. By listening to their stories, by validating their emotions and by challenging their preconceptions, a therapist can help a man accept that boys can cry, and they can do so with pride.

### Q What can men do if they are struggling?

Mental health is stigmatised so it's thought you're 'mad' if you seek a therapist's help, but it's the sanest thing to do. If you feel your friends will think talking about feelings is a sign of weakness, it's easier to talk to someone

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### Why don't men seek therapy?

Listen to the UKCP's Matt Nicholls talk to psychotherapist Andy Cottom about men's mental health. Go to [psychologies.co.uk/men-and-therapy-podcast-ukcp](https://psychologies.co.uk/men-and-therapy-podcast-ukcp)

## About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

• **The UKCP** Alongside professional support for our members, we are the leading research, innovation, educational and regulatory body working to advance psychotherapies for the benefit of all. Our membership includes more than 8,000 therapists and 70 training and accrediting organisations. Members work privately, in public health or third-sector organisations, offering a range of approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups.

• **To find the right therapist**, log on to [psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist](https://psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist) and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit [psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist](https://psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist) to locate a therapist near you.

