

Men and Depression

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Winston Churchill called it his “little black dog” and did his best to exhaust it with 18-hour days and then drown it in champagne and brandy. No one is immune to depression, but men share unique risks and dilemmas.

Men come well loaded to ignore depression’s signs; we are taught that men are independent, and isolate ourselves. We learn that real men tough it out, and so we suffer even when there is a solution. We are discouraged from even recognizing our emotions, and remain unaware of them until they bring us to our knees. Self-control, especially of our mental health, is so paramount that we willingly break ourselves to maintain the outward appearance of control.

Symptoms

Many people miss the physical symptoms of depression. Subconscious tension can lead to endless headaches, restless nights, cramping, and gastrointestinal pain. Anxiety can lead to tightness in the chest and a burning, heart attack-like feelings in the chest: acid-reflux. Your weight may suddenly change without changing your diet or exercise. It all adds up to fatigue and exhaustion, even with activities that should yield excitement, energy, and happiness.

Internally, depression builds on and leads to anger and frustration. In time these can lead to risky or violent behavior. An inability to focus turns into more frustration. Two coping strategies are common: seeking stimulus or giving up on stimulus. You may have risky sex. You might gamble or abuse drugs to reclaim a feeling of life.

Or you may simply give up on the world; why participate if you don’t enjoy anything anymore? When was the last time you spoke to family and friends, or set aside time for a hobby you enjoy?

Thoughts of suicide are common in deep depression. It is critical to listen carefully to these sorts of thoughts -- men are four times more likely to commit suicide because of depression than women. According to the Mayo clinic, men also arrive at suicide much more quickly, averaging 12 months as opposed to 42 months for women.

Risk factors

As mentioned above, men are often conditioned to ignore their inner life until it reaches an unmanageable crisis point. However, there are objective risk factors that indicate a tendency towards depression.

- Lack of control over your responsibilities and their consequences. Men have been told all their lives that they must be responsible. When held accountable for more than is reasonable, at work or in our social lives, intense pressure builds up. Many men hold themselves accountable for things far removed from their ambit

- of responsibility, effectively inviting depression into their lives.
- Lack of security. A lack of job or relationship security invites us to work harder to find that security -- too hard some times. When that investment isn't rewarded, it fuels anxiety.
 - Excessive work. Some men, like Churchill, try to exhaust their depression through work -- no one can criticize you for working too hard, right? But this is another way of ignoring the frustration and anxiety inside you. It also puts us in an environment where we must be responsible and tend to the needs of others -- it is what we are paid for, after all. This can begin a cruel cycle where responsibility fuels anxiety and frustration, ending almost certainly in depression.
 - A family history of depression. Did your great uncle drink? He might have been struggling with undiagnosed depression. A family history of depression could mean that you are genetically vulnerable to depression, or it could mean that you have learned coping mechanisms from your family that invite depression, such as excessive work or limiting yourself socially.
 - Low wages. When your work isn't valued, it weighs more heavily on you.

What you can do

First, exercise. It's a great tonic, and doesn't require a prescription. Then talk to someone you trust. A therapist is ideal, but many unions and professional organizations offer counseling by trained peers and professional counselors. Depression is a complicated interplay of elements; genetics, environment, and you mindset, especially how you cope with stress. Getting someone else's help in untangling that knot is critical. A therapist can provide much needed perspective, as well as the experience that comes from working with depression on a daily basis. Even just spending more time with family and friends can take much of the pressure off.