

How Men Are Overcoming Mental Health Stigma

June is Men's Mental Health Month and this year, the spotlight is firmly on a crucial concept: *closing the empathy gap in men's health*. It's a phrase that resonates deeply because, for too long, the unique mental health challenges faced by men have been overlooked, misunderstood, or simply left unaddressed.

Men's mental health remains a silent crisis, overshadowed by societal expectations that equate masculinity with stoicism and emotional suppression. The "empathy gap" a term describing the lack of understanding, funding, and support for men's mental health—perpetuates this struggle, leaving many men to suffer in isolation .

This article explores how men are breaking through these barriers, challenging outdated norms, and finding pathways to healing. By addressing the empathy gap, we can foster a culture where men feel empowered to seek help without fear of judgment.

The Empathy Gap in Men's Mental Health

What Exactly is the "Empathy Gap" in Men's Health?

According to the Men's Health Network (2025), the Empathy Gap *"refers to the lack of care, funding, and support for men's issues, including health, education, and emotional well-being.* Men's challenges are often overlooked, leading to fewer resources, delayed care, and limited awareness." This isn't just about statistics; it's about real lives. Men die six years earlier than women due to preventable health issues, and alarmingly, suicide rates among men are significantly higher, yet mental health initiatives often fail to acknowledge interventions that truly resonate with men.

At its core, this gap is the disconnect between how men often experience distress and how it's typically perceived, acknowledged, or even permitted to be expressed within society.

1. Societal Expectations and Stigma

Traditional masculinity norms pressure men to be strong, self-reliant, and emotionally restrained, discouraging vulnerability. Studies show that only 35% of men seek professional help for mental health issues, compared to 58% of women . This reluctance stems from:

- Fear of appearing weak or burdensome .
- Media portrayals that depict men with mental illness less sympathetically than women .
- Workplace cultures that penalize emotional expression .

2. Misunderstood Symptoms

Men often manifest mental distress differently than women, leading to underdiagnosis:

- "Acting out" behaviors (anger, substance abuse, risk-taking) may mask underlying depression .
- Physical symptoms (headaches, insomnia) are dismissed as stress rather than mental health concerns .
- Suicide rates among men are 3–4 times higher than women, yet depression is underreported .

How Men Are Overcoming the Empathy Gap

1. Redefining Masculinity

Men are challenging toxic norms by:

- Embracing vulnerability sharing struggles openly in peer groups or therapy .
- Reframing help-seeking as "strength, not weakness" a shift promoted by campaigns like Men's Health Month .
- Engaging in community-based programs (e.g., sports, men's sheds) that foster connection without clinical stigma .

2. Accessible and Male-Friendly Support

Innovative approaches are making mental health care more approachable:

- Therapy tailored to men: Problem-solving and action-oriented therapies resonate better than traditional talk therapy .
- Digital and workplace interventions: Apps, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and teletherapy reduce barriers to access .
- Peer support networks: Men are more likely to engage when support comes from relatable figures (e.g., veterans, fathers) .

3. Systemic Advocacy and Awareness

Efforts to close the empathy gap include:

- Policy changes: Advocating for gender-sensitive mental health funding and research .
- Media representation: Highlighting male mental health stories to normalize conversations .
- Workplace initiatives: Training managers to recognize signs of stress and promoting work-life balance .

The Path Forward

Closing the empathy gap requires collective action:

- Individuals: Check in on the men in your life with simple questions like "How are you really?" .
- Employers: Foster psychologically safe workplaces where men can discuss mental health without repercussions .
- Healthcare providers: Develop screening tools that account for male-specific symptoms .

As the Men's Mental Health Month Foundation states, "Empathy drives health equality"—a future where men's well-being is prioritized benefits everyone .

Unprocessed Pain, Misunderstood Reactions: The Legacy of Trauma

Another critical aspect of the empathy gap lies in the understanding of unprocessed trauma. Painful past experiences, whether from childhood, significant life events, or even the cumulative effect of societal pressures, don't simply vanish. When not addressed, they can linger beneath the surface, significantly impacting present behaviour and emotional responses.

This often shows up in men as:

- Sudden bursts of anger or aggression: reactions that seem out of proportion to the current situation.
- Emotional numbness or detachment: A feeling of being disconnected from oneself or others.

Difficulty with intimacy and trust in relationships.

Avoidance behaviours: Steering clear of situations, people, or memories that might trigger discomfort.

Hyper-vigilance: Always being on guard, expecting something bad to happen.

When these behaviours are met with judgement or criticism rather than an understanding of the underlying pain, the cycle continues. We focus on the reaction, not the root cause, and the man remains trapped in the emotional legacy of his past.

Bridging the Gap: It Starts with Listening and Validation

Closing the empathy gap begins with a fundamental shift in how we approach men's mental health. It requires moving beyond stereotypes and engaging with genuine curiosity and compassion.

The Homewood Health Centre suggests some simple yet powerful conversation starters:

“How are you feeling on a scale of 1 to 10?”

“You’ve been a bit quiet; how are you?”

“How is work at the moment?”

“When did you start feeling this way?”

“How are you coping?”

“Who else can you talk to?”

“What help do you need?”

These questions aren’t just about getting answers; they’re about opening a door, creating a safe space, and signalling that it’s okay to not be okay. Active, non-judgmental listening is paramount. It means validating their experiences even if their expression of emotion doesn’t fit a traditional mould.

Cultivating Connection, Fostering Healing

When we approach men’s struggles with true empathy, we create a bridge. This understanding allows for healthier coping mechanisms, fosters authentic connections, and provides a path towards deeper, lasting healing.

It’s about shifting the narrative:

From “man up” to “open up”.

From “deal with it” to “let’s talk”.

From “be strong” to “be real”.

This Men’s Mental Health Month, let’s commit to being more empathetic listeners, more understanding friends, and more supportive communities for the men in our lives. Their mental well-being is vital, and closing the empathy gap is a collective responsibility.

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