Mental Health

We Need to Talk About Men's Mental Health at Work

by Ruchi Sinha

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Summary. Research on men's mental health shows how distress manifests differently in men than women, and how they cope with stress differs as well. Men face both self-stigma and social stigma about showing their emotions or talking about their level of anxiety, low... **more**

How often have you seen men openly discuss their mental health at work? Probably, not very often. But does that mean they're coping with it better? No.

The research on men's mental health shows how distress manifests differently in men than women, and how they cope with stress differs as well. Men are far less likely to seek help for mental health challenges, irrespective of age, nationality, or ethnic or racial background. More often than not, the demotivator is driven by gender-related barriers and stigmas.

Men face both self-stigma and social stigma about showing their emotions or talking about their level of anxiety, low mood, and stress. The self-stigma comes from the often-unconscious masculine ideals that have been culturally conditioned and socialized into their narrative of self, or their identity as men. The traditional male stereotype in several cultures includes ideas that men are expected to be assertive, ambitious, independent, self-reliant, in control, strong, and successful earners who have stable jobs and high-income security. These socialized ideals of masculinity motivate men to strive and live up to societal expectations to be strong (vs. weak), self-sufficient (vs. needing help), action-oriented (vs. emotional) and in control of their life (vs. lacking influence on their own life). This can reduce their capacity to acknowledge and recognize their own sadness and articulate those feelings to themselves.

As a result, taking the time to think deeply about their feelings often causes anxiety in men, as it makes them realize that their current state

doesn't match their own, or larger society's, definition of masculinity. In fact, doing so may lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment.

The same pressures can also demotivate men and make them reluctant to seek professional mental health services or share their mental distress with close family, colleagues, and friends. A recent report found that mental ill-health among men in Australia remains high, and 25% of men experience symptoms that would qualify as a clinical mental health condition. But only a quarter of men said they would seek help from a mental health professional. In the United States, men are 3.6 times more likely to die by suicide than women, but they are less likely to seek help for mental health struggles.

Men's Mental Health at Work

The state of a person's mental health has serious consequences — not only in day-to-day life, but also at work. It impacts factors like employee productivity, performance, and motivation. While there are many personal factors that can influence someone's mental state, the workplace can be an incredibly triggering environment. Fast-paced industries or high work volumes in combination with low resources (time, budget, autonomy, flexibility, support) are common reasons for poor mental health in both genders. However, precarious employment (low job security; part-time shorter employment contracts) and stagnation in their careers (not getting promoted or making a lower salary than their friends) are a critical predictor of poor mental health in men.

Whether they're at work, or outside of it, distress in men can often show up in behaviors such as:

1. Distraction: Binge-watching shows, excessive time on devices or video gaming, spending endless hours at work or over-investing at work, diminished work performance, difficulty concentrating and completing tasks on time.
2. Escaping: More frequent and heavy drinking (especially alone), binge eating and over-investing in indulgent activities.
3. Withdrawal: Not joining the team for lunches or post-work social activities, eating alone, avoiding social contact with friends and family, taking an excessive number of sick days.
4. Externalization : Low impulse-control, high irritability, snapping at and getting frustrated with colleagues, showing anger, and portraying anti-social behaviors towards others.

How Managers Can Step In

The first step to getting people to be comfortable talking about their mental health at work, irrespective of gender, is to build a climate where it is psychologically safe to show vulnerability. When it comes to men, this is even more important, as they're less likely to open up about their emotions.

Here are some ways to create that comfort:

Show your own vulnerability in private settings.

During a one-on-one with your male employee, open the door to a vulnerable conversation. For instance, you might say, "The past few weeks have been really tough for me. I was juggling a sick parent and new project deadlines. I'm feeling overwhelmed with all that's been going on and need some time for self-care. How have you been?" If you're a male manager, it is all the more important to set the example. Show

acceptance and vulnerability by sharing the impact of your own life and work challenges on your emotional state.

Talking about how you've managed to seek help from others or even professionals, normalizes the idea for your team members, encourages them to similarly express their emotions, and removes some of the fear typically socialized into men.

Note, that to create a more casual atmosphere around such conversations, my recommendation is not have these in a meeting room or conference room. Instead, think of doing this when you are walking over to a coffee shop or over a lunch meeting at a café. A casual setting will lower the stakes of the conversation.

Legitimize and redefine help-seeking as a show of strength of character.

Reframe help-seeking as a sign of strength, grit, and leadership competence. When you speak with your employee, talk about how seeking support is a good thing as it reflects how one is committed to helping themselves be a better leader to their followers and contribute at the level of their true potential.

You could say, "I wasn't comfortable opening up about my struggles at work at first, but I've begun to realize that it's a sign of maturity when leaders look after themselves so they can contribute and help others. It also felt courageous to reach out to my mentor to seek advice and support. I feel this is helping me become a more empathetic and compassionate manager."

Focus on the semantics.

We know that when individuals identify with a particular ideal (masculine identity in this case), any conversation or use of words that threatens their sense of belongingness to that identity can result in anxiety. For example, when men hear words like depression and sadness being referenced to describe their condition at work, they may become more anxious and avoid discussions. As a manager, you can be socially intelligent and tweak your language to avoid identity threatening terms, like “depression” and “sadness” especially when you’re around men.

For example, instead of saying, “handling depression and sadness,” or “dealing with stress,” you could say, “recovering from burnout,” “developing mental fitness, resilience, and strength.” This doesn’t imply that we should use the former terms when we’re around women. There’s never a wrong time to evolve our language and semantics that have a more positive undertone.

Don’t expect magic to happen after you implement these tips. This is a sensitive subject and change takes time. In the end, remember that talking about their mental health is tough for anyone, not just for men. But as a manager, you can open the door and create the space people need to start having real, honest conversations, and get the help they need.

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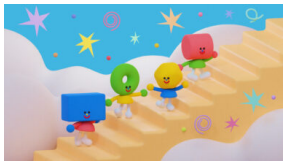

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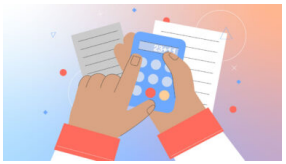

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