What You Should Know About Depression in Men

by ERIC PATTERSON

Depression in Men

Close your eyes and think of someone with depression. Picture the person lying on the couch staring at the TV. Picture them struggling at work or having a hard time caring for the kids at home. Imagine the emotional pain they endure on a daily basis.

Who did you imagine? What did they look like? If you are like many people, you pictured a woman in her late 30s or early 40s. Over the years, the public has begun to widely associate depression with this group. This view may be accurate, but it is limited.

The truth is that depression in men is common. It is a notion that those in the mental health field take for granted, and one that many others find difficult to accept. In actuality, estimates claim that six million men in the U.S. deal with depression yearly. Though, this number is lower than the number of woman with depression, it remains a significant percentage of the population and one not to be ignored.

Men face several barriers that woman do not when it comes to depression. First, there is an overall lack of understanding in regards to the symptoms of depression men experience. Second, there are pressures from society and the men themselves to not admit to feelings of depression. Third, men tend to seek out negative coping skills to address their depressive symptoms. This piece will investigate each barrier while offering solutions and measures to improve the mental health and well-being of men with depression.

Depressive Symptoms: Men vs. Woman

Breaking news: Men and woman are different. As a man, you might think that because you don't lay in bed all day reaching for another tissue to dry your eyes, you don't have depression. Just as men and women can have different symptoms of a heart attack, you can have different symptoms of depression.

Common symptoms in women include:

- Feeling slowed down and lacking energy
- Feeling sad, empty, guilty and shameful
- Being indecisive and unsure of themselves and their life
- Feeling weepy and crying often
- Finding it more difficult to leave the house

Next page: common symptoms in men.

Depressive Symptoms: Men vs. Woman

Common symptoms in men include:

- Feeling more irritable with a “shorter fuse”
- Being easily distracted with worse attention
- Feeling more tired and fatigued
- Thinking that others are to blame for the current situations
- Being more suspicious and lacking trust for others
- Sexual side effects, impotence

As you can see, there is some overlap in symptoms, and generally, both men and women will have similar symptoms. Men tend to be more angry and irritable while women tend to feel sad. This has a lot to do with fulfilling gender roles. It is more acceptable and expected for men to respond with anger than sadness. For women, the opposite is true.

The anger will come from a number of sources. For one, your overall stress is likely higher when depressed. When stress is high, you are like a pot already simmering on the stove. It only takes a few more degrees to trigger a rolling boil. Other people will experience you as having a “short fuse.” You will experience it as being annoying, dumb or infuriating.

Secondly, your anger comes from a need for control. As a man, you like to have power and control over the world around you. Depression works by making you question your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Women respond by being indecisive while you become even more self-assured and quick to act. Many of these impulsive choices will not work out for the best, and when they don’t, you will become even angrier and more controlling as you place the blame elsewhere.

Pressures to Deny

Gender stereotypes and expectations play a role in the second barrier. Despite all of the progress made to reduce the negative stigma attached to mental health treatment and issues, men continue to see certain disorders as feminine. To some, admitting that they have depression is like admitting that they are no longer fully male. After all, they claim that men are strong and women are weak. Unfortunately, these flawed opinions only lead to increased issues now and later on in life.

Men often report thinking that they should be able to “get over” their depression or “push through it.” They believe that their willpower can conquer depression. They can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and move on with life. No one is quite sure where this thought process comes from, but it is evident in other aspects of life. If a boy gets hurt on the playground, parents will encourage him to “walk it off.” If a girl gets hurt, parents of either sex will provide a more nurturing response.

Oddly enough, some mental health issues are more gender neutral or even more accepted for men. Anxiety and ADHD seem to be perceived in neutral ways. Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are seen as more masculine disorders, which might lead to more acceptance in the diagnosed male. This perception is rather foolish, though. It is like saying diabetes is feminine and cancer is masculine. Everyone is susceptible to some type of mental health issue. Depression does not care about gender.

Next page: covering the problem and beating the barriers

Cover the Problem

Because men with depression continue to be stigmatized by society and themselves, they are more likely to resort to negative coping skills to suppress the symptoms or act is if they are not present at all. For some, they can maintain a tentative balance and an ability to function throughout the days and weeks. These behaviors only return to create more problems, though, as negative coping skills add more problems to the overall picture. Negative coping skills of men with depression include:

- **Alcohol and other drug use.** If you don't like your feelings, cover them up. This is the distorted thought process of a man with depression. Remember, men with depression are not thinking about solving the problem long-term. At this point, their only focus is getting through the day. Alcohol and other drugs work to numb the unwanted feelings and provide temporary euphoric feelings. Alcohol, for example, is actually a depressant so the self-medicating man with depression will feel worse in the days following consumption.
- **Not all addiction and addictive behaviors revolve around drugs.** Gambling is an addictive process that many men with depression find appealing. Gambling helps to distract the person with depression as it changes the focus away from himself. The highs gained from a win will block out all feelings of depression. Of course, the losses will only reinforce the thoughts and feelings associated with depression. Despite the inherent risks associated with gambling, men with depression still prefer the highs and lows to the strict lows of depression.
- **The most negative coping skills are focused on escape or avoidance.** TV exemplifies both. Whether it is becoming engrossed in a sport or mindlessly scrolling through the on-screen guide, TV can distract from the world of depression. It also distracts from the rest of the world. Men with depression that seek out these negative coping skills will let work, family and friends go neglected to focus on avoidance.

Beating the Barriers

How do you fight back against the barriers of being a man with depression? Simple. Admit it. Admit it to yourself and then admit it to the people around you. Changes in society must come from the inside out not the outside in. As a male with depression, you become the best advocate. You become the tool to help yourself and other men with depression.

Denying your situation is living a lie that furthers your depression. If you cannot gain acceptance, your life will worsen with your symptoms. As importantly, the people in your life will suffer as their son, husband, dad or friend continues in a world of depression. Note that finding acceptance does not mean that you like depression. It only indicates that you are aware of it and the negative impact it has on your life.

After the admission, the treatment plan becomes clear. People with depression respond very well to a combination of medication and psychotherapy. The medication will help relieve your symptoms. The therapy can encourage new ways of thinking and acting to improve your life.

One of the best treatments for depression is one that actually fits with male stereotypes: exercise. Exercise has a huge antidepressant effect that will be a great outlet for your built up anger and irritability. It will reduce your stress making other facets of your life easier to address and manage.

Conclusion

Stepping outside of the stereotypes is challenging. Now that you know how you are feeling is depression and what barriers are in place, take the measures to break through to the other side. Do it not only for you but for the others in your life and those that will follow. Every movement needs a leader. Could it be you?