



BREAK THE CYCLE

Men's mental health

By Professor Ian Kelleher

Public awareness of the importance of mental health has increased dramatically in recent years. On TikTok alone, videos using the hashtag #MentalHealthAwareness have been viewed more than 20 billion times. But in a world that often teaches men that vulnerability is a sign of weakness; men are regularly not a part of this mental health conversation.

That's despite the fact that mental illness is at least as common in men as it is in women – and suicide rates are far higher, which is probably at least in part because men are less likely to acknowledge or address psychological problems. There's still an uphill battle for many men to be able to recognise the strength in actively managing our mental health.

But with prominent figures, like actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and athlete Michael Phelps, opening up about their battles with depression, people are beginning to realise that mental health problems can strike anyone – even record-smashing Olympians. Johnson and Phelps are also great examples of how facing up to those mental health problems can turn your life around for the better.

So, what are some simple steps men can take to actively improve their mental health?

1. **Take pride in expressing your emotions:** we need to recognise that the ability to discuss our emotions is a sign of strength, rather than something to be avoided or “bottled up”. That's not something you can learn to do overnight. Did you get the basketball in the hoop the first time you threw it? Probably not. The same applies here. Practice makes perfect. Start by opening up a little with someone you trust and build from there. Not only will you feel better, that openness will also enrich your relationships with family and friends.
2. **Connect with nature:** Being surrounded by the natural environment can have powerful effects on your wellbeing – go for a hike, check out a forest trail, or just spend some time in your nearest park, surrounded by trees. We evolved to be in nature – if there are times when you feel like things are out of control, reconnecting with nature is a good way to
3. **Get your body moving:** Exercise is a powerful way to boost your mood – and keep your body healthy. You don't need to pound the pavement or lift heavy weights. Try different ways to exercise to find what works for you – walking, cycling, swimming, kicking around a football – whatever exercise you enjoy (or can tolerate), build it into your routine.
4. **Sort out your sleep:** every week a new scientific study is published showing how crucial sleep is to mental health in ways we didn't previously understand. Take it seriously. Set up a relaxing routine for your sleep and aim for 7 – 9 hours a night. Don't fall asleep on the couch – make your bedroom your fortress of relaxation, a sacred place where you go to charge up for the next day.



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5. Know your limits: alcohol and substance use can provide short term relief from stress or trauma but they can also have serious negative effects on your mental health. The key is to understand why you're turning to them – and then think about what needs to change in your life to reduce the stress that's been driving your alcohol or substance use. Or think about whether there are less harmful activities or behaviours you could use instead to help cope with this stress.

6. Reconnect with your inner child: the biggest myth is that play is just for kids. Embrace playfulness like you did when you were a child and you'll see its mood-boosting benefits. Whether it's returning to a hobby that brought you joy as a kid or taking up something entirely new, finding ways to build play into your life can be a game changer, no matter your stage in life.

7. Help someone else out: sometimes when you're feeling hopeless, the best thing you can do is to reach out to help someone else. Doing something to help out a friend, a family member or even a complete stranger not only helps solve a problem for them but has also been shown to boost the wellbeing of the person doing the helping. Win-win!

All these activities can boost your mental health. But remember, making these changes is not a race (no one goes from couch to marathon overnight); it's better to make changes one at a time. Pick one that looks the most achievable and start with that. Then, when this has become an established part of your routine, try adding another.

It's also important to remember that, no matter how many steps you take to look after your mental health, no one is immune from mental illness. And, while the above activities can be helpful at any stage in your life, when it comes to mental illness, these activities sometimes just won't cut it.

We all have periods of low mood – it's part of life. But “capital D” Depression can floor both your body and mind. With “capital D” Depression, your mood can be low for weeks on end, you can feel increasingly angry and irritable, or you can find that you're just not enjoying life like you used to. You might find your sleep is messed up, you're eating far less (or far more), and you don't have the energy or motivation to do the things you normally do. Your concentration might be shot and even simple decisions can seem overwhelming. You may be feeling worthless and even start to doubt whether life is worth living. What's the strongest thing a man can do in this situation? Ask for help!

There are a lot of organisations to help men live happier, more fulfilled lives, covering the whole spectrum from sports and social clubs, to men's sheds, positive places to relax while working with your hands, to specialist services for treating severe mental illness.



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It's time to break the cycle of men waiting until our lives are crashing down around us before looking for that help – or worse. Mental illness does not discriminate – it can affect any man: your father, brother, son, neighbour, colleague. And if it comes knocking at your door, the bravest thing you can do is say, "[Help](#)".

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It's OK not to feel OK; and it is absolutely OK to ask for help'