

Men And Mental Health: It's Not Easy! | CPD Blog

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As I get older I wish I could go back in time and visit with my grandpa. My grandfather was born and raised in southeast Idaho, right along the old Yellowstone Highway. He grew up raising sheep and cattle, and he was proud to be a cowboy and a horseman. He was tall, dark, and handsome with thick curly hair that was always combed back, and a thin mustache that made him look more like a riverboat gambler than a cowboy. He grew up tough and independent but he also wrote poetry and cried often. I noticed these things, but didn't recognize these patterns in myself until much later in my life. One of the last times I talked with my grandpa, before he passed away from heart failure, he began to open up about his struggles with depression, although he didn't really have the language to talk about it. He had been raised in a culture where males didn't talk about emotions or mental health, and that culture still pervades America today.

I was also raised in a culture where I was taught to be strong, decisive, and independent. I grew up in Alaska, within hyper-masculine culture of the 1980's and 1990's. All of the cultural messages I received communicated that I needed to be tough and emotionless; I needed to rely on myself and no one else. The movies I watched reinforced this stereotype: John Wayne's cool decisive mannerisms, Han Solo's anti-social bravado, Indiana Jones' tough independence, and Arnold Schwarzenegger's multiple strong and violent characters were all idealized by my friends and I and they were held up as models of what a man should be.

It is difficult to talk about mental health as a male in the United States. American men are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and emotional isolation. As an American male, we have been taught that we shouldn't need anyone, and that reaching out for help...especially with emotional or mental health issues...is a sign of weakness. As a result many American males don't have the language to talk about their mental health struggles, and they don't know how to reach out for help when they are feeling isolated and alone. We are raised with an ideal of manhood that is completely unrealistic and unhealthy and this stereotypical model of masculinity is exacting a terrible toll on men in the United States.

In the media we are used to hearing about how women and minorities are overrepresented in many societal problems, but suicide is one exception to this pattern. Suicide in America [disproportionately affects middle-aged men](#). According to the most recent statistics approximately [132 Americans die by suicide each day](#), and 103 of them are men (approximately 78%), with those ages 45 to 64 representing the fastest-growing group.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the states with the highest rates of suicide are all in the Mountain Time Zone with the exception of Alaska. Rates of suicide by middle-aged males in New Mexico, Alaska, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and Colorado are [almost double the national rate](#); with, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah just slightly less than that. It is ironic that these states with a strong, independent Western identity are the states where men are clearly struggling the most with managing their mental and emotional health.

Over the past few years I have had multiple acquaintances who have died by suicide because they weren't able to talk about their issues or get the help that they needed. This has made me much more aware of my own mental health and the fact that I need to talk about it and take active steps to maintain my own emotional well-being, but it's not easy!

Two of the most important things for my mental health are sleep and exercise. I have noticed that my ability to be resilient is directly correlated with how much sleep I get. When I get a solid 7-8 hours of sleep I can think more clearly, I'm more emotionally grounded, and I feel less anxious. Over the past 10 years there has been a [wealth of research](#) on the [importance of sleep for mental health](#). The United States is one of the most sleep deprived countries in the world, and our busy schedules and demanding workloads mean that we often skimp on our sleep. Prioritizing sleep is something that has really helped me.

Exercise helps me feel better physically and mentally; in fact, recent research has shown that in some cases exercise is as [effective as medication for managing depression and anxiety](#). I try to exercise for an hour every day, even if it's as simple as walking my dog, because I have found that it has a profound impact on my mood and outlook. I know that these sound like pretty standard, textbook suggestions, but study after study continues to show that [both sleep and exercise](#) are two of the most effective methods for supporting your own mental health and emotional well-being.

Understanding my family's history with mental health issues, and then taking care of my own mental health isn't something that I was explicitly taught. It has taken me many years to figure out what I need to do to support my mental health, and it takes consistent attention and effort. It is challenging to prioritize sleep and exercise when I am really busy and have more work than there are hours in the day, but I am a better person, both physically and mentally, when I make time for myself.

I have also been making efforts to talk about mental health with my family, so that my children have the language they need to talk about their emotions and needs. We visit about our family history, and the emotional and behavioral patterns that we have inherited. My partner and I talk regularly about the things that we do to support our mental health, so that our children understand that there are things they can do to take control of theirs. By talking about our emotional wellbeing we are hopefully normalizing it, and removing some of the stigma around mental health that is still so prevalent in our society.

May is Mental Health awareness month, and I would like to encourage you to take some time this month to think about how you can more actively address your mental health. Find time to talk with your children about mental health so they know that there's help available if they are sad, depressed, or anxious. We have a responsibility to teach our children that they can be resilient and gain strength from challenging life experiences. Addressing the mental health needs of our families, communities, and country takes a concerted, collective effort, but together we can make a difference.

If you need help or feel alone, please don't suffer in silence. Speak up, speak out, and don't be afraid to ask for help. There are [many suicide prevention resources](#) out there to help you.