

REDEFINING MALE STRENGTH:

THE PATHWAY TO RECOVERY AND CHANGE

ARTICLE BY
ZAC SEIDLER



Content note: Depression, anxiety

Everyday, boys and men are faced with a wall of sound, broadcast from across our society and coming from the mouths of our friends and family... "stop crying!" "man up!" "don't be a girl!" "suck it up!" These calls for our strength and our bravery build up an expectation of silence in the face of difficulties and of independence when all we need is someone to lean on.

The concept of masculinity that many of us have grown up with, that we have been spoon fed from a young age, with our toy cars,

and our contact sports, is that men are meant to act in a certain way and women another.

However, what is becoming increasingly clear, thanks to the efforts of brave men like Buddy Franklin and Ian Thorpe, is that masculinity is not a one size fits all term.

Masculinity is not limited to stereotypical ideas of being emotionally uncommunicative or violent when things aren't going your way. Masculinity is being a team player, is being daring and courageous to challenge yourself, is having the resources to be self reliant when needed, is being a giving and caring mate.

Too often, these features of masculinity, the features that are real strengths and can help to build men up and to help them grow, are forgotten or brushed over, because its easier to focus on the problems rather than the solution.

Researchers and clinicians have been saying for decades that men do not want to seek help, especially when it comes to psychological concerns like anxiety or depression. What we have recently learned though is that men do want to seek help, and will engage in treatment, if they are given the right type of help.

Taking a central role in one's mental health is a critical feature of the traditional masculinity that has so often been pathologised and thought of as "unhealthy" in our society.

Having measurable and achievable goals, and learning action-oriented skills to better oneself are all a means towards achieving self-management and empowerment, which is exactly what depression and anxiety strip from a man. It is feelings of hopelessness, an inability to get through the day to day, whether that be homework or your job, that make these mental health issues so paralysing.

It's important that boys and men realise that psychological help is not there to further reinforce feelings of weakness or inability, but rather to ensure that you get back to feeling strong, capable and empowered once more.

Reframing psychological help as a pathway towards self-betterment and being the man you want to be, rather than seeing it as some shameful admittance of weakness, is the way forward.

Lying on a couch and talking about emotional material or reflecting on your childhood or crying are stereotypical parts of psychological treatment that have spread throughout popular culture and become many men's perception of the entirety of psychological help-seeking.

It is understandable then, that they shy away from such a service which may be in direct conflict with many of the foundational masculine traits that underpin their personality."

" Stereotypes about men are just as dangerous as stereotypes about psychological treatment"

What needs to be communicated however, is that psychological treatment comes in all shapes and sizes, it's adaptive to your needs, and that's important, because we know that not all men are the same. Some men may need to cry, while others want to write or build or sing. Stereotypes about men are as dangerous as stereotypes about psychological treatment

If you've made it into headspace or are just reading this article from the safe confines of your computer, you've made the first step. The courage and bravery that so many men seek is not in distancing or social isolation when you're feeling down, but through connection and realising you can't go it alone.

Entering into treatment is daunting but the potential benefits are great. Knowing that you don't need to leave your masculinity at the door is key, it's going to be useful to both you and your clinician if you're honest with them about what you want, what your goals are and how you'd like to achieve them.

It's about time we realise that calls to "man up" don't refer to overcoming low mood or stress through some magical masculine power of stoicism and strength, but instead, it's a call to action, for creating change through purposeful effort. While it may feel at times as though you have limited choice or hope and that sitting down and talking to someone you don't know is the last thing you want to do, psychological treatment is a great way of getting past your barriers or blocks and getting the hard work done to move forward and get power back into your hands.

Zac Seidler

Men's Mental Health
Researcher and Provisional
Psychologist

Young men can seek online or telephone support from mensline.org.au or 1300 78 99 78