

Helping men seek help

It is widely recognised that men find it hard to seek help, but how can health professionals make it easier, asks Professor Ewan Gillon, Director of First Psychology Scotland?

THE CHALLENGES

One of the biggest challenges for health professionals is enabling men to seek and find help when they need it. This is doubly true in the areas of psychology, counselling and psychotherapy, where on average only 30-40% of all clients are male.

Acknowledging distress or mental health difficulties can be a highly shameful experience for men, encouraged to show 'strength' and invulnerability at every opportunity. Hence many men simply won't ask for help until it is too late, or if they do ask, find therapy so alienating and uncomfortable when offered that they can't stand it for long enough to make any difference.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

So what can those of us do in the field of psychology and counselling to make any difference? Well firstly perhaps is the recognition that many men often want and need different things from the therapy process than women.

Masculinity asks men to be in control so methods and approaches that work with this rather than against it may be important.

These may include things like information resources, cognitive-behavioural strategies designed to understand and rationally 'evaluate' the causes and effects of patterns of experiencing, indeed less personally threatening forms of therapy like telephone or email support may all have a role.

However, equally important may be that many men have to be given 'permission' to feel bad, and so talking about emotions (e.g. sadness, worry, anger) and normalising them as natural, positive things may be required.

Sometimes a male psychologist can really help in this regard, by modelling what it is like to talk honestly and directly about feelings. Women can help in this way also, perhaps by displacing the myth that females prefer men to be tough and invulnerable.

THE THEORY

The American Clinical Psychologist, Professor Ron Levant, describes many men as suffering from alexithemia, a term used to denote an inability to accurately identify and relate to emotions. He traces this to male socialisation, and the constant message given to men that feelings don't count in the race to be 'top dog'. He suggests all psychological therapy with men is likely to be affected by this condition, to a greater or lesser degree, and advocates working directly with it by talking about what it means to be a 'man'; helping men develop greater emotional literacy; and using emotional 'logging' (diary keeping) to improve therapeutic work wherever possible.

This may seem somewhat unusual to many practitioners, but perhaps there is an important role for such an approach? It would become a valued addition if in any way it helped the many men suffering psychological and emotional distress finally get the help they need and deserve.

MORE ABOUT MEN

This is an abridged version of an article by Dr Ewan Gillon published in Therapy Today, December 2007.

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