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Depression in Men: Information for Men, their Friends and Loved Ones

Summary: Clinical depression is a common condition that can affect anyone including men. Clinical depression goes beyond normal sadness, and causes disruption to daily life and function, with symptoms such as depression and troubles with sleep, energy, and concentration. Whereas some people can have sad and depressed moods, men may have more irritability and anger. Unfortunately, depression is often under-recognized in men. Men tend to be socialized to ignore or suppress their feelings, which can make it challenging. The good news is that depression is treatable. Treatment often starts with lifestyle changes like increasing physical activity, getting outside, and self-care. Although men stereotypically don't like talking about their problems, the good news is that there are different types of counseling, therapy and support, and these can be tailored to the person. Antidepressant medications may be helpful as well. Seeking help is a sign of strength. Depression is treatable and people recover. It is possible to feel and function better.

Dave's Story, Part 1

Dave is a thirty something year old man who typically leads a happy life with his wife and children. However, over the past few months, he noticed something was off. He felt sad and drained most days. Activities he used to enjoy—playing soccer with his friends, joking around with his kids—felt more like chores. At work, he struggled to concentrate and started missing deadlines. Physically, Dave felt off. He had trouble sleeping and woke up feeling exhausted. He experienced headaches and a tightness in his chest that made him worry something might be wrong with his health. Instead of talking to his wife about how he felt, Dave withdrew. He worked late, spent hours scrolling on his phone, and drank more in the evenings to "relax."

Deep down, Dave knew something was off, but thought, "I'm just busy with work, that's how it is with everyone these days…" Unfortunately however, things were not getting better, but Dave didn't know what to do…

Normal Sadness vs. Depression

On the one hand, feeling sad, upset, or irritable happens to everyone from time to time. These emotions are part of life and usually go away after a few days. The benefit of feeling sad or upset is that it helps us realize that something isn't quite right, triggering us to try to understand and cope with the stress or situation.

On the other hand, if feelings of sadness are so severe that they persist (for at least 2-weeks or more), and cause problems with functioning at home school and work, then it might be clinical depression.

Signs and Symptoms of Depression in Men

Moods and feelings	The classic symptom of depression is feeling sad and depressed, however men may also report feeling more irritable, frustrated or numb and empty.	
	Many men find it hard to talk about their feelings or ask for help because men are socialized to keep down their feelings and "be strong".	
Loss of interests	Losing interest or enjoyment in things you usually like, or loss of motivation.	
Negative thoughts	When depressed, people may feel negative about themselves. They might even feel that their situation is hopeless, and the only way to cope is ending their lives. Note that even if people FEEL like things are hopeless, this is actually a symptom of depression. The good news is that getting help and support for the depression will help things get better.	
Behaviours	A classic symptom of depression is pulling away from friends, family, or activities they used to enjoy. With men who are depressed, there is an increased risk they may end up doing more risky or impulsive behaviours, such as driving recklessly, gambling, or alcohol, drugs, vaping, cannabis. Unfortunately, even if this appears to relieve distress in the short-term, it usually ends up worsening things over time.	
Physical symptoms	Physical symptoms may include • Troubles sleeping • Low energy • Poor concentration, troubles remembering things or making decisions.	
Unexplained physical symptoms	Depression may also contribute to physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach aches, chest tightness or muscle aches. Unexplained aches and pains can be an indicator of possible depression.	

How Common is Male Depression?

Depression is common.

- In Canada and the United States, around **18%** of men will experience clinical depression at some point in their lives.

What Causes Men to Get Depressed?

Depression is complex and usually is the result of various contributing factors:

Troubles meeting basic needs
• For mental wellness, our body has basic, physical needs, such as
- Need for sleep
- Need for nutrition
- Need for shelter/housing
- Need for medical care

Troubles meeting higher needs
• For mental wellness, we need to feel a sense of purpose, belonging, meaning and hope.
• Purpose is what you do in your day, which might include being a student, having a job, looking after other family members, caring for children and loved ones, etc.
• Belonging is feeling that you are loved and part of something, including your family, friends, and community.
• Meaning might be knowing that you make a positive difference for others, or that you are needed, etc.
• Hope is knowing that even if things aren't the best right now, that things can get better in the future.

Stressful life events, including trauma:
• The buildup of stress from living in modern society can be overwhelming. This includes day-to-day stress (worries about relationships, finances), or big stresses (such as trauma).
• Examples include
- Meeting basic needs, such as finances, housing, groceries.
- Relationship stresses such as loneliness, conflicts with others, breakup, separation and divorce
- Employment of finding and keeping work;
- Witnessing or experiencing abuse or neglect
- Breakups, conflict or losing someone you love.

Male socialization
• Many men have been socialized to be stoic by ignoring their feelings, or not seeking help (like the famous stereotype of not asking for directions), from fear of being seen to be weak.
• This can happen to any gender, however men can be more at risk because of the way they might have been socialized by traditional and modern culture.

Health Problems
• Health issues (such as heart disease, chronic pain and others) can physically increase the risk of depression, as well as make it harder to get enough sleep, be employed, etc., and thus increase the risk of depression.

When to Go for Help

Have you been

- Feeling sad, irritable, or overwhelmed most days for more than two weeks…
- Noticing changes in your sleep, energy, or mood…
- Having problems functioning at home, school or work?

If so, know that this is not you -- this is the depression.

The good news is that

- Help is out there -- there are many services, supports and strategies can be tried.
- Depression is treatable -- it will get better.

Where to Go for Help

Are you (or your loved one) in a crisis (e.g. feeling overwhelmed, feeling like ending your life, etc.?)	➡	Call a Crisis Line • In Canada, you can call 9-8-8 for the Suicide Crisis Helpline, available anywhere, anytime 24/7, in French and English. • Provide listening and support, and help connect you to the services and supports that you need. OR Call 911 for immediate assistance (such as police or paramedic) OR Go to the nearest hospital emergency department.	
Do you (or your loved one) need help but it is not an immediate crisis?	➡	See a family physician or other primary care provider. • They can also check for medical issues that could be contributing to your symptoms, e.g. low thyroid or vitamin deficiencies. • They can help connect you to appropriate services and support in your community.	

Lifestyle Strategies

Strategies such as lifestyle strategies are things that people can do on their own, in order to help with the depression. Many people prefer to start with lifestyle strategies, and see if this provides benefit for their symptoms. Professionals may also recommend starting with lifestyle strategies first, and may even deliberately prescribe a certain type of lifestyle strategy depending on the person. Men often prefer ‘activity’ and ‘doing things’ as opposed to sitting and talking about their issues.

Regular, deliberate physical activity (such as 1-hr daily of moderate exercise such as walking, or shorter periods of more intense exercise). It is usually usually best to harness the of habits’ and write these down.	
Getting outside daily, in order to have more sunlight and nature, which is especially helpful with seasonal depression.	
Ensuring a healthy diet such as the ‘Mediterranean diet’ with more fruits, vegetables, and omega 3 fatty acids (such as through fish and flax seed oil), and less processed foods.	
Reduce and ideally avoid any use of alcohol, or recreational drugs such as cannabis and psilocybin. In general, even if they seem to help in the beginning, they tend to worsen things over time. If you truly believe it is helpful, then speak with your healthcare provider.	
Mindfulness such as formal mindfulness (yoga, meditation) or informal mindedness.	

Getting Support

Reach out to friends and family

Talking to someone you trust can be helpful if you're feeling low but aren't sure if you need professional help.

Here's when reaching out can make a difference:

- If you're feeling overwhelmed or need someone to talk to.
- If you need encouragement to take the next step, like making a doctor's appointment.If you'd like company for an activity, like a walk, coffee, or something you enjoy.

Seeing a Counselor or Therapist

Although many times people may prefer to start with lifestyle strategies, if that is not enough, then it can be helpful to see a professional for help with depression.

Examples include:

- Counselor or therapist, which refers to any person that can do counselling or talk therapy.
- This includes psychologists, social workers, registered psychotherapists, etc.

For some people, the idea of talking about their problems is something that they are interested in. On the other hand, the male stereotype is that men don't like talking about their problems. The good news is that when you see a professional, they can talk to about what your goals are, and find a type of approach or therapy that best fits with you. There are many types of 'talk therapy' for people that feel comfortable with talking. There are also other types of therapy that are more 'action' oriented, which may be a better fit for other people.

Medications for Depression

Are there still problems with mood despite trying other strategies such as lifestyle strategies, counselling and therapy?

If so, then medications may be very helpful.

Antidepressants are commonly prescribed to help regulate brain chemicals that affect mood, such as serotonin, dopamine or norepinephrine.

- They often take 4 to 6 weeks to start working. While they can reduce symptoms like low energy, trouble sleeping, or poor concentration, mood improvement may take time.
- There may be side effects such as headaches, nausea, restlessness, and sexual difficulties.

- The good news is that most side effects get better over time, but it’s important to talk to your doctor about any concerns.
- Antidepressants are usually taken for several months to a year. When it’s time to stop, your doctor will help you slowly lower the dose to avoid unpleasant feelings like dizziness, nausea, or irritability. These symptoms might happen if antidepressants are abruptly stopped.
- Some people may need to stay on medication longer, especially if their depression returns after stopping.

For some people, antidepressants might only partially work. In these cases, your doctor might adjust the dosage or combine medications for better results.

Supporting Your Friend or Loved One with Depression

When someone you care about is depressed, it is not easy for their friends and family. The good news is that there are many things that you can do to support your loved one.

Do’s	Don’ts
Let them know that you are there for them • "I'm here for you," • "You can talk to me about anything,"	
Let them know that you are concerned about them • “Hey, you don’t seem yourself… Is everything okay?” If you can, use your own self-disclosure • “I’ve been through some really tough times myself, enough to recognize that maybe you’re dealing with something… I’m here if you want to talk or just hang out.”	
Help your loved one get help. • You might offer to go with your friend to see their doctor, drive them, or offer to watch their kids so that they can go. If the professional recommends treatment, then give your loved one support in getting that treatment.	Don’t minimize your friend’s problems, and expect it to go away on its own. Don’t give simplistic advice such as “You just need to exercise more.” Physical activity is important, but if it is depression, it will require more than just that to get better.
Do be patient. It can be frustrating when a loved one is depressed.	Don’t get upset or frustrated at your loved one with depression. It rarely ever helps; it just makes them more upset, or sad or guilty, which makes things worse.
Do be empathetic. • If they say they are sad or angry or upset, agree and say, “It sounds like you are feeling sad.” • Everyone has a right to their feelings.	Don’t minimize or invalidate, e.g. Don’t say things like, “I don’t understand how you can be depressed when you are actually so lucky…”
Do spend time with them • Invite them to go out for a walk, a coffee, a meal, or just hanging out and watching a movie.	Don’t avoid your loved one. That will make them feel rejected, which makes things worse.
Do ask them how you can be supportive such as • Emotional support, e.g. “How can I be helpful? Do you want me to listen? • Giving advice, e.g. “Do you want my advice?” • Distraction, e.g. “Want to go for a walk?” • Day-to-day support, e.g. “Can I help you with watching the kids? Laundry? Groceries?” • Providing company, e.g. “Or do you just want to hang out -- we don’t need to talk, just hang out.”	Don’t jump to giving advice if the other person isn’t ready for it.
Do give hope • “I’m with you -- we’ll get through this.” • “Things will get better.”	

Do take any comments about suicide seriously. • Validate that your loved one is probably feeling overwhelmed in order to be talking about suicide. • Call a crisis line if you are worried or just simply unsure what to do.	Don’t ignore talk of suicide.

Specific Considerations for Men

Do’s

- Do accept that many men are socialized to appear stoic, 'tough' and not be vulnerable.
    - At the same time, you can thank your male friend and show appreciation for being real, authentic, and not perfect.
- Do discourage unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol and drinks.
    - While they might temporarily help, they usually worsen things over time.
    - Invite your friend to have a non-alcoholic beverage with you instead.
- Do offer to do activities to keep them busy (behavioural activation) such as
    - Intellectual and cognitive activities
        - DIY projects such as building/repairing items and home improvement tasks.
        - Playing a strategy game with a friend.
    - Physical activity such as
        - Going out for a walk
        - Team sports such as basketball, or soccer
        - Working out, alone or with someone
        - Outdoor activities like fishing, hiking, or camping.

Dave’s Story, Part 2

Dave went to see his family doctor after a thorough discussion with his wife, and motivation from her. During the appointment, Dave tried his best to state his symptoms truthfully and thoroughly since he is comfortable being vulnerable with his doctor. His doctor explained that Dave was experiencing depression, a treatable condition. They created a plan together that combined antidepressants, therapy and lifestyle changes such as exercise and reconnecting with his family.
When Dave started antidepressants, his doctor explained that the medication might take a few weeks to start working and could have some mild side effects at first. Dave stuck with this plan, and began to notice small improvements over time.

Dave also began Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which helped him recognize and challenge negative thought patterns. For example, he realized that he often blamed himself for things out of his control, which made him feel even worse. With help from his therapist, Dave learned to reframe these thoughts into more balanced and realistic ones

Dave also started exercising a few times a week. He began with short walks, eventually working up to jogging, which helped boost his energy and mood. At home, he reconnected with his kids by playing games and helping them with their schoolwork. On weekends, he and his wife started gardening together..

Over time, Dave noticed significant positive changes. He was sleeping better, felt more focused, and began to enjoy the little things in life again. CBT gave him tools to handle stress, and the combination of therapy, medication, and support from his family helped him regain a sense of hope and purpose. Looking back, Dave realized that seeking help was the turning point that allowed him to rebuild his life.

For More Information about Depression in Men

HeadsUpGuys: Provides self-check tools, self help articles and recovery stories for men suffering from depression

and suicidal thoughts.
https://headsupguys.org/

Canadian Men's Health Foundation: Their website has a "mindfit toolkit" which provides information on self-assessments, mental health tips, suicide prevention, and also provides virtual counselling and podcast information for men dealing with mental health concerns, including depression.
https://menshealthfoundation.ca/

Buddy Up: A suicide prevention campaign that encourages men to have conversations with their friends to promote connection and well being. It also organises activities for men to promote social support.
https://www.buddyup.ca/

Movember: Apart from the classic moustache growing campaign that occurs annually in November to raise money for men's health, Movember provides information on how to recognize signs of depression in oneself and others, information on suicide prevention and resources to access for men with depression. It also has programs that educate men on how to support others with mental health concerns such as "Movember Conversations."
https://ca.movember.com/mens-health/mental-health

Dudes Club: An organisation that originally was started in Vancouver but now has spread to various locations across Canada, Dudes Club promotes mental health for indigenous men by prioritising cultural competence, genuine connections and support
https://dudesclub.ca/about/

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About this Document

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