

Men's Depression: Overcoming Stigma, Getting Help

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“Jack” (not his real name) hadn't seemed himself to his family and friends for several months. Known to all as friendly and outgoing, he'd become increasingly avoidant of social outings. Whereas he had previously enjoyed community and church functions, Jack came to miss such events more often than not, usually citing a headache or fatigue. He'd also begun missing his 16 year old daughter's high school basketball games. His wife, “Carolyn,” (also a pseudonym) was aware that Jack had not been sleeping soundly for some time, despite his use of over-the-counter sleep aids and scaling back his coffee consumption. She and others, especially Jack's co-workers, had also noticed how uncharacteristically forgetful he'd been of late. On the occasions when Carolyn asked him what was wrong, Jack either responded tersely or shrugged apathetically.

One night, overhearing Carolyn tell a friend on the phone that she was concerned that Jack was no longer happy in the marriage, he summoned the courage to share with her that he'd been experiencing feelings and beliefs he'd never had before; constant, occasionally intense thoughts of how he didn't deserve his family's love or his successful career. He found himself increasingly unable to take pleasure in any of the good things or enjoy any of the people in his life. Jack knew he'd become short-tempered and irritable, so he thought it best for everyone if he spent more time alone. In doing so, however, he found solitude merely gave him more time to worry about the way he felt. He'd even had fleeting thoughts of suicide. Jack apologized for any doubts of his love that Carolyn had entertained; he also sheepishly admitted that obviously his ‘go it alone, tough guy’ approach wasn't working, but actually making things worse.

Jack's reluctance to communicate his persistent feelings of sadness and worthlessness, even to his wife, is quite common among men who've been raised to believe that the admission of such thinking, however unhealthy and disruptive to their lives, is somehow unmanly or a sign of weakness. Factors as varied as family, culture, environment, and the generation in which he was born can all profoundly influence how a man comes to view what is and isn't appropriate to share of himself. Although depression has long been believed to be more common among women than men (12% vs. 7%, respectively), recent studies suggest that the discrepancy may in fact be explained away by apparent differences in how depression is experienced and, in particular, reported by the two genders.

Indeed, research undertaken to assess depression awareness found that men were more likely to describe apathy, fatigue, poor anger management, and increased alcohol consumption as responses to the same circumstances in which the prevalent responses of women were emotional volatility, sadness, guilt and worthlessness. Recognizing that such findings should not be construed as applicable to any one individual, but rather as a generalization, the report would seem to support two perhaps complementary conclusions: that men often experience depression differently than women; and/or that men are less likely than women to acknowledge that they are experiencing symptoms more traditionally associated with depression. Both statements are probably accurate to some degree; what is beyond dispute, however, is that while women are more likely to attempt suicide, men succeed in killing themselves four times as often.

Often, however, men succumb to stigmatic cultural beliefs which prevent their seeking help for depression. This is especially unfortunate, as treatment (generally a combination of psychotherapy and anti-depressant medication), has an 80% effectiveness rate. With Carolyn's support and reassurance that he was, if anything, more a man for recognizing he needed help and wasn't afraid to seek it, Jack was able to make an appointment

with his family doctor and called his HMO for a referral to a psychotherapist. No longer is he suffering in silence due to a skewed image of masculinity.

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