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English 12

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Men's Mental Health

Sixty men die by suicide every hour across the US. ("The State of Men's Mental Health in Montana") Rural areas being one of the leading areas for unreported mental health issues and high suicide rates among men. According to the article "Men's Mental Health" written by the *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*, nearly 6,000,000 men are struggling with mental illness right now, a number excruciatingly high. It's an issue that affects men from all walks of life, rural and urban areas, veterans, and average individuals. Men's mental health is often forgotten and overlooked, because men often under-report and silence the struggles they are facing due to societal norms and expectations that make men feel they cannot express how they feel.

Counseling often has a bad reputation with many believing it is a hoax and doesn't work. This is far from the truth; counseling can help cure depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. Therapists use tools such as EMDR (Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) which desensitizes patients from traumatic events they have experienced. Counseling is misunderstood and highly valuable. (Majerus) According to adaa.org studies have shown that men are often reluctant to seek treatment for their struggles, which makes them 4 times more likely to commit suicide.

In rural settings the problem is even more prevalent, and even less heard of. Rural areas have significantly lower rates of reported depression and stress but significantly higher rates of suicide. (Mairo Ahmadu, Rachel V. Herron, Jonathan A. Allan, Candice M. Waddell) Those who live in rural areas may even have a worse set of expectations that surround them and are prevalent in their lives. In an interview with Teressa Majerous, a certified therapist and former

school counselor, she mentioned the constant association with alcohol in the lives of people who live in rural areas, particularly on ranches. She stated, "Drink when you're happy, drink when you're sad, drink when you celebrate." This is a reckless attitude, as people who are intoxicated often make poor decisions. ("Alcohol And Suicide." *Alcohol help*)

Taking care of both physical and mental well-being is crucial, especially in rural areas where healthcare access can't be easily accessed ("Men's Health" *Northeast Montana Health Services*). Regular appointments with a doctor help monitor medical conditions like: high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer, while managing diseases such as heart and respiratory issues is essential for long-term health ("Men's Health" *Northeast Montana Health Services*). Mental health resources provide support for stress management, depression, and anxiety, ensuring individuals receive the care they need ("Men's Health" *Northeast Montana Health Services*). Additionally, making healthy lifestyle choices, including balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and reducing substance use, not only promotes overall health but also helps build a stronger, more connected community ("Men's Health" *Northeast Montana Health Services*).

In Montana, over 10% of men reported that their mental health was "not good" 14 out of the last 30 days ("The State of Men's Mental Health in Montana" *CHP Health Montana*). This is skewed, as men are unlikely to report their struggles, and it can be assumed that the actual number is significantly higher. The societal norms that surround men are toxic. Men are expected to be strong, fearless, and to show no emotion. The stigma surrounding men's mental health often prevents them from seeking help, because the social pressures discourage vulnerability ("Men's Mental Health" *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*). Despite the ongoing support of mental health challenges, nearly one in ten men experience depression or anxiety, and less than half receive treatment, leading to men being four times more likely to commit suicide than women ("Men's Mental Health" *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*).

Among men, certain trends and challenges are more prevalent. One issue is the accessibility of pornography through cell phones, which can alter perceptions of relationships and reality, oftentimes leading to addiction, as the brain's chemistry responds similarly to substances like methamphetamine, thus creating a cycle of dependency. While this problem affects both genders, young men are especially susceptible (Majerus). Additionally, rural men encounter unique stressors, such as the unpredictability of farming and ranching, where events like hailstorms can erase months of hard work in moments (Majerus). Combined with the isolation of rural life, these factors intensify mental health struggles. A similar pattern emerges in sports injuries, where years of dedication can be overturned by a single accident, adding to emotional strain. Addressing these challenges requires targeted education, support, and resources to help men navigate these complex realities (Majerus).

The mental health system for veterans has been subpar for far too long. Multiple heartbreaking stories illustrate the reality of veterans breaking under the weight of untreated trauma. While Congress attempted to help, its efforts had only a mild impact. (Sincavage, Alyson "The war comes home: how Congress' failure to address veterans' mental health has led to violence in America.") A criminal defense lawyer emphasized this, saying, "To deny the frequent connection between combat trauma and subsequent criminal behavior is to deny one of the direct societal costs of war and to discard another generation of troubled heroes." According to the May 2007 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, the number of veterans in state and federal prisons increased by more than 50,000 between 1985 and 2000, but this number saw a decline between 2000 and 2004, decreasing by 13,100 veterans. (Sincavage, Alyson "The war comes home: how Congress' failure to address veterans' mental health has led to violence in America.") While we can see there has been some help for these individuals, for far too long they were left to deal with the trauma from their past, the damage has been done and throughout our history these heroes were kicked to the side and left to suffer with mental diseases.

Several factors contribute to mental health struggles in men, including financial stress, relationships, divorce, workplace pressures, isolation, fatherhood, and substance abuse (Thomas, Liji "Male Mental Health" *News-Medical*). Post-traumatic stress disorder is common among those who have witnessed war, violence, or other traumatic events, PTSD shows symptoms like distrust, flashbacks, nightmares, emotional detachment, and suicidal thoughts (Thomas, Liji "Male Mental Health" *News-Medical*). Approximately 60% of men have experienced such traumatic events. While women tend to become anxious or jittery due to PTSD, men are more likely to respond with aggression or violence (Thomas, Liji "Male Mental Health" *News-Medical*).

Additionally, body image and eating disorders affect men differently than women; men with eating disorders obsessively count calories and may engage in excessive workouts, while those with body dysmorphia disorder often fixate on muscle development, their physical features, or uncommon aspects, such as the size of their sex organs.

Binge drinking is twice as common in men, with alcohol frequently playing a role in male suicides (Thomas, Liji "Male Mental Health" *News-Medical*). About 84% of suicides among individuals with a history of mental illness occur in men (Thomas, Liji "Male Mental Health" *News-Medical*). There is a pressing need to encourage open conversations about men's mental health, suffering in silence is neither safe nor healthy.

Mental health issues are often closely tied to poor self-care habits, including a lack of exercise, a poor diet, and insufficient sleep (Majerus). Despite having access to outdoor activities, many young people remain inactive, negatively impacting both their mental and physical well-being (Majerus). This inactivity creates a cycle of low energy and declining health, that reduces motivation to engage in healthier behaviors. This snowball effect that is created makes it seem impossible to feel mentally healthy again. (Majerus) Physical exercise plays a crucial role in balancing brain chemistry, as evidenced by "runner's high", which enhances mood and mental clarity. (Majerus)

Consuming high-sugar foods and unhealthy eating habits can lead to physical discomfort and worsen mental struggles. (Majerus) However, adopting consistent and healthy practices, such as regular exercise and a healthier diet, can significantly improve both mental and physical health. (Majerus) Even small lifestyle changes can break the cycle and create greater overall well-being. (Majerus)

Post-COVID, mental health struggles have increased due to factors like isolation, fear, and brain inflammation linked to the virus, often referred to as "COVID depression". (Majerus) While the pandemic has increased awareness of mental health issues, stigma particularly among men, continues to discourage many from seeking help. Preventative education, such as suicide prevention and depression awareness programs, have gained traction, providing youth with the tools to recognize and address mental health concerns.

However, rural areas face distinct challenges, such as limited access to counselors and mental health services, making it harder for those in need to receive support and education. Taking proactive steps through reaching these communities and creating improved access to care is essential in lessening the long-term mental health impact of the pandemic.

Improving men's mental health requires addressing the stigma, enhancing access to resources, and having open conversations about what is going on. The rates of suicide and untreated mental health issues highlight the need for action. By raising awareness, creating supportive platforms, and offering proper education and care, we can help men find assistance without fear or judgment. Combating these challenges, making mental well-being a priority for healthier individuals is a way to take tremendous strides to a better world for men.

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