



Depression is curable if you only recognise it

ADRI PRINSLOO

MEN DO become depressed. This is a seemingly obvious statement. What is less well known to men, health care professionals and the public is that many more men are depressed than we know.

On March 30 the World Health Organisation made this startling announcement: depression is now the primary cause of disability and ill health worldwide. Moreover, depression can lead to suicide and somewhere in the world a person dies every 40 seconds in this way.

In many countries, including South Africa, about four times more men die by suicide than women. Yet women are four times more likely to be diagnosed with depression. This discrepancy suggests that there are more men who are depressed than statistics show.

There are several reasons we may think of men as unlikely candidates for depression. Cultural expectations that "big boys don't cry", that men should keep a firm grip on their emotions, be tough, able and always coping with life's demands is powerful in shaping expectations.

For instance, like most people, health care professionals too are prone to seeing depression as a "female disorder", hence missing signs of depression in men.

In addition, men themselves tend to be less adept at recognising symptoms of depression than women do.

It is becoming increasingly evident that depression in men may not look exactly the same as in women. While some men do experience the classic symptoms such as a loss of interest and pleasure, energy loss, concentration problems and feelings of worthlessness or guilt, they also experience and express additional symptoms or "depressive equivalents".

Men may "do depression" differently from women. This means that they use avoidance strategies such as spending a lot of time at work, watching television or doing all manner of things in order not to think about their problems.

Risky behaviours such as having an affair and using drugs or alcohol to self-medicate are often used as means to dull or escape emotional pain. These strategies are of course mostly ineffective and often exacerbate the problem; alcohol does not alleviate depression and overworking or having an affair are mostly damaging to relationships.

Some men may also "feel depression" differently from the way women do. Men are more likely to be aware of depression's physical symptoms such as losing weight, difficulty with sleeping or feeling tired. Depressed men may experience intense irritation or anger, which may escalate into aggression. For some men it may be far easier to be angry or hurtful than to show sadness or despair because these behaviours are considered to be manlier. Women on the other hand are more prone to feeling sad and worthless.

All these signs in essence mean that some depressed men try to hide depression from others and themselves.

Without acknowledgement and diagnoses there is no treatment. While health care practitioners are becoming more sensitive to how men express and experience depression, it may persist to be difficult for men to recognise and acknowledge it. Asking for help is hard for most men. It signals weakness and vulnerability that are seen as unmanly. A man may also feel that he will be stigmatised as weak and unable to cope if he does seek help.

But there are men who are manning up to depression. There is no insurance against depression. It is highly treatable by means of medication, psychotherapy or both. The first step is to recognise it.

Depression is more than just a dip in mood. It distorts the past into a terrible history, darkens the future and throttles today. It profoundly affects the way you see the world, others, and yourself – the way you live and love in the world.

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