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LET'S START TALKING ABOUT MALE SUICIDE

International Men's Day is observed November 19 each year and the aim of this day is to address the unique challenges faced by men. These include but are not limited to, promoting healthy masculinity, raising awareness around men's health, as well as celebrating their lives, achievements and contributions in different areas.

The theme for 2023 was "Zero Male Suicide". Suicide is a profound societal issue and the mental health issues around men are often overlooked. It's time for us to break the silence and work together to create a world where no man feels he has no way out. Suicide is the 10th highest cause of death globally and men die by suicide four times more often than women. We need

to start talking about male suicide more seriously.

By talking about the real problems that men face, it doesn't devalue or detract from the struggles women go through. We need each other. In Portuguese there is a word "conviver" which means to live and get along with each other as a community. This concept is paramount to our wellbeing. We can only address male suicide if we work together.

To achieve "Zero Male Suicide" we must start by dismantling the stigma surrounding men's mental health. Men, often conditioned by societal expectations to be stoic and resilient, may find it challenging to express vulnerability. Being stoic and resilient can be amazing

traits and goals in our lives but that should not get in the way of asking for help when it is needed. As practitioners, we need to foster an environment where seeking help is seen as a sign of strength and not weakness. We need to work towards helping men feel comfortable about opening up conversations about mental health where no one feels judged for sharing their struggles.

The problem that arises is that men often express their feelings differently and in different environments when compared to women. The system as it exists right now may not feel ideal for opening up for men, as it may mean going against what they feel is their nature in some or other way. If we pay attention, we may

notice that men require an action, project or space to organically open difficult conversations versus actively starting a conversation and speaking openly about their feelings. Men may worry that by using the latter approach, that they may be shut down, dismissed or emasculated. The reality is that we all need to use sensitivity and stoicism at different times in our lives. Knowing when to use each of these is what can make the difference.

The Operations Director, Cassey Chambers, at the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) stated “the interesting thing is that more women are diagnosed with depression than men and not necessarily that women have more depression than men. Men just don’t talk about it and don’t seek help”. This is a huge societal concern. The statistics surrounding male suicide are alarming, and each number represents a life lost, a family shattered, and a community affected. Behind every statistic there is a unique story of a person who suffered in silence.

When we take a closer look at suicide, we find that men use more “aggressive” methods of suicide and have more access or means to complete suicide. Women may overdose on medication rather than hanging themselves or using a weapon which is often found in the case of a male suicide. There is never one reason or contributing factor that results in suicide. It’s a combination of difficulties; each case is unique and different. It could be a relationship with family, partners, colleagues, wives and friends. Trauma is also a unique contributing factor. We should not forget that financial status may add to challenges such as losing a job, difficulty finding work, increased stress at work and all other financial aspects, which may contribute to men taking their own lives.

Spring is also a useful time to be aware of potential suicides. Difficulties manifest differently for different people and that is why it is important to get to know your patient as there are often patterns to pick up difficulties. Seasonal

depression is an example of this. In winter the patient may be very depressed and will not have the physical and mental capacity to act on their suicidal ideation. However, as the weather changes, energy levels lift and whilst still in a depressive state the patient may have just enough capacity to plan and act on their suicidal ideation. Sometimes, we as practitioners may miss this very crucial period which may just save a life.

Now that we have somewhat fleshed out what suicide may entail, let’s look at what suicide prevention looks like. It doesn’t only include providing support when men are in crisis but also checking in with them when things seem off or their behaviour is unusual. Practical tips that may just save a man’s life include but are not limited to:

- noticing changes in behaviour,
- noticing when men become unusually quiet, and check in on them,
- noticing when men are not acting their normal selves,
- checking in when men have disengaged or lost interest in activities they usually enjoy, and
- noticing increased feelings of guilt, shame or that they are a burden to others.

As practitioners we need to be sensitised to the patient’s unique difficulties and not just listen to what they are telling us but what they, perhaps, not saying or what is behind what they are communicating.

Men just like women, are yearning for connection. It’s a fundamental human need. Men have emotions

and need a functionally specific manner to understand and work through them. Men want to grow, support, and love the significant others in their lives. Let’s celebrate men and their significant achievements to society. Let’s notice differences in personality or character that do not divide us unless we chose to discriminate. Let us rather work together in humble and complimentary ways to be bigger than the sum of our parts. The first step towards all of this is getting unstuck from unhealthy patterns and becoming open to facing the messiness in each of us.

Achieving “Zero Male Suicide” is not just a goal; it’s a call to action. It requires a commitment from each of us to create a society where mental health is prioritised, and every man feels valued and supported. Together let us strive for a future where no man walks alone in his struggles, and where the darkness of despair is replaced by the light of hope. Why do we acknowledge International Men’s Day? To promote basic awareness of men’s unique difficulties. Also, to celebrate their lives, achievements, and contributions in their various communities. It is of utmost importance to acknowledge the different roles men play in our community and how these are often extremely challenging.

“Soak up the views. Take in the bad weather and the good weather. You are not the storm.”

- Matt Haig

References available on request. MHM

