

Sex and depression: Study finds your gender can affect your mental health

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A University of Western Sydney study which explored men's experiences of depression has revealed that gender has a significant impact on the success of mental health treatment.

According to UWS School of Psychology PhD graduate Dr Zakaria Batty, men and women cope with and receive treatment for depression in distinct ways.

"Australia's suicide rate currently shows men are four times more likely to commit suicide than women," Dr Batty says.

Dr Batty says part of the reason for this alarming rate is that men aren't accessing the therapy services available because the services are not adequately targeting men's needs.

The study of nearly 400 men found a range of gender role conflict issues that impede successful treatment for depression, including men's tendency to conceal vulnerability inhibiting their ability to openly seek help.

"Fears of mental health stigma in the community, and lack of support to seek therapy from family and friends, often prevent men from accessing treatment," Dr Batty says.

Education is an important factor in reducing this stigma and appropriate messages about mental health should be taught to boys at an early age

and circulated throughout the community for everyone, he says.

However, health professionals can also help by being mindful of the additional issues that men face when seeking help and coping with depression.

Professor Jane Ussher from the UWS School of Psychology, who collaborated on this research, has recently conducted a study with the Nepean Division of General Practitioners that found GPs were more likely to refer women than men for psychological support.

She says, out of 746 referrals to psychologists only 30% of these were for men. "GPs say this is because men are less likely to visit their doctor, and even when they do, are less likely to talk about psychological problems because of mental health stigma.

"However, the men who did receive psychological treatment found it very beneficial, suggesting that more discussion and information about mental health services may increase men's willingness to seek help," Professor Ussher says.

According to Dr Batty, men tend to use medication for depression because they can avoid the stigma and emotional expression associated with counselling therapy.

However GPs and therapists can accommodate men's preferences for treatment, and need to consider that taking the step to seek counselling is a real milestone for many men - one that needs to be encouraged as a strength, says Dr Batty.

Dr Batty says by changing common names for therapy treatment men may be more likely to access help and complete treatment with success.

"Where men might shirk from the prospect of attending 'counselling', they may be open to attending 'classes', 'workshops' or 'seminars'.

"Simple interventions like this provide men with coping strategies that can help tackle this growing trend of rising depression rates in men, head on."

Source: University of Western Sydney

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