

Breaking up is hard to do—but many men find healthy ways to cope

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The popular stereotype that men don't want support during a breakup, separation or divorce is simply not true, according to a new paper by researchers at the UBC school of nursing.

In reality, many men do seek out help by accessing [online resources](#), coaches and self-help books, or they reach out to friends, family and community-based groups, and some engage professional counselors.

Senior author Dr. John Oliffe, a professor of nursing who leads the men's health research program at UBC, and research co-author Mary T. Kelly say men can be resourceful and resilient as they work their way through painful [relationship](#) change.

"A failed relationship can lead to significant mental stress—men already have higher risks for suicide than women, and marital separation increases that risk four times. By exploring the ways through which men seek help after a breakup, we can potentially design better supports for their mental health," says Kelly.

"It's also important to shift the narrative," adds Oliffe, the Canada Research Chair in men's health promotion. "The story that is most often told is that when a relationship breaks down, the man goes into crisis and/or perpetrates violence on his partner, but this is not the trajectory for most men. It's helpful for guys to see that most breakups end with the men working through their challenges by leaning into help."

Creative help-seeking

"We've known that men seek help when an intimate partner relationship breaks down, but we always thought it was professional help they sought. Our research shows that they creatively used various strategies," says Oliffe.

One of those is doing solitary work and reaching out to established connections. About a quarter of the men said they did a lot of internet searches for blogs, coaches and other resources. These guys typically were younger or their relationships had shorter durations. They reached

out to friends or [family members](#), not necessarily to find a solution, but to chat things through, or they read self-help books.

Men who had been in longer-term relationships, where children are involved or who may be dealing with litigation, division of assets and so on, were more likely to make new connections and seek out community-based help like local dads' groups or groups of men who have been through separation or divorce.

About half the men engaged professional [mental health](#) care services such as counseling. Typically these were men who had a pre-existing [mental illness](#) or those who needed formal help to get through the enormity of what they were feeling.

Breaking stereotypes

This paper disrupts the stereotype that men do not go to the doctor and they don't want help, notes Mary Kelly.

"It shatters the trope that men aren't emotional and aren't affected as much as the rest of us by a breakup. We also tend to think that men don't do introspection or vulnerability, but a lot of the men were really engaging in that deep kind of work."

Resources—and some advice

Kelly adds that there's not a lot of resources out there to help guys build better relationships. "However, our group at UBC is working on a few projects. With support from Movember, we're building an online resource for men who want to learn more about dealing with relationship conflicts and building relationship skills. We're also currently looking for participants for a new project that will invite men to share their ideas on

what contributes to a healthy relationship."

For men currently dealing with a breakup, Oliffe recommends taking the time to "sit with the emotions that go with the breakup. You can be sad and happy, angry and sorrowful at the same time. Look to reconnect or stay connected with friends and family. Be careful about substance use. Maintain a routine, get some exercise and be open to reaching out for professional help."

The research was published in *Qualitative Health Research*.

More information: John L. Oliffe et al, Mapping Men's Mental Health Help-Seeking After an Intimate Partner Relationship Break-Up, *Qualitative Health Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/10497323221110974](https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323221110974)

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