Dear Healthy Men: You recently wrote about a CDC report that supposedly showed that males are more likely than females to commit suicide. Well, my 19-year-old niece recently killed herself and I just saw the new CDC report on youth suicides, which said that the suicide rate among females is growing faster than among males. Why are you pretending that suicide is a male problem when it affects everyone equally?

A: There’s no question that both men and women kill themselves. And every suicide is a tragedy. But to suggest that suicide is a problem that affects everyone equally—or, as some major media outlets have “reported,” that it affects females more than males—is dangerously inaccurate. The simple fact is that overall, for every female suicide there are 3.5 male suicides. In 2017, those numbers were 10,391 and 36,782, respectively. Among young people (ages 10-24) the male-to-female suicide ratio is nearly 4:1. As I noted in the column you referenced, suicide is the 6th leading cause of death among American males. It’s not in the top 10 for females.

Before we get into the reasons behind what I believe is a deliberate distortion of the issue, we need to take a minute to discuss the difference between a “rate” and sheer numbers. You’re right that in the new CDC report, between 2000 and 2016, the overall suicide rate for females increased much more quickly than the rate for males. That makes for great headlines, but again, it’s dangerously inaccurate. Here’s why.

In 2000, the suicide rate among all females was 4 per 100,000. In 2016, that rate was 6 per 100,000—a 50% increase. Over the same period, the rate for males grew from 17.7 per 100,000 to 21.4 per 100,000, an increase of 21%. So yes, the female suicide rate grew more quickly than the male rate, and there needs to be some serious investigation into what’s driving that increase. However—and this is a really big however—while the rate of females taking their own lives increased by 2 per 100,000, the rate of males increased by nearly 4 per 100,000. In actual numbers, there are, again, at least 3.5 male suicides for every female one.

That said, looking at rates can be helpful when tracking changes within groups. For example, white men—especially those aged 25-64—are at least twice as likely to take their own lives as men in every other racial group except Native Americans, who lag white men by about 15% (24 per 100,000 vs 20 per 100,000). And white males, who make up about 30% of the population, account for nearly 70% of all suicides. By the way, white women are far more likely than any other women except Native Americans to commit suicide.

The Inconvenient Truth

So why aren’t we getting the full story behind the epidemic of suicides? There are a number of factors, chief among them is the fact that reporting the truth about who’s committing suicide would require acknowledging that the contemporary
narrative—in which men in general and white men in particular are a universally privileged class and have no legitimate problems—is false. Ignoring the very real issues facing men in this country and continuing to tell men that they should be stoic, that their problems aren't as big as everyone else's, and to never ask for help is killing people. Tens of thousands every year.

The bottom line is that we need to have a serious discussion about suicide and the factors that lead so many of us to see it as a viable option. At the same time, we need to educate ourselves—in an open and honest way—about the primary victims of suicide and why men (and especially white men) are so overwhelmingly and disproportionately represented. Acknowledging one group's problems should in no way keep us from acknowledging those of any other group. But denying that those problems exist is, once again, a deadly mistake.

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