

# Knowing when to ask for help

REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST,

SHARON HINSULL, SHARES HER EXPERTISE.

Data recently released by Counselling Directory UK revealed a dramatic rise in the number of young men reaching out for emotional and psychological support. Little wonder, you may think, given the extraordinary year that 2020 turned out to be. But this is a trend that has been steadily growing for some time. Now more than ever, young men in the UK, many of them struggling with the pressures of fatherhood, are recognising the need for a safe and supportive space in which to air and offload their feelings.

During a recent talk with a group of young fathers from the Future Men charity in London, the Duke of

Cambridge told them: “We need to be easier on ourselves as men and dads... we don’t have to be superheroes.”

This seems to be a theme echoed by many young fathers who ultimately find themselves seeking support in therapy. All too often the warning signs go unheeded as the competing demands of work and home steadily start to escalate, leaving minimal capacity for dealing with any other stresses that life might unexpectedly have in store. Unsurprisingly, for many dads the Covid pandemic has served to add to all of these challenges, creating an even heavier weight of pressure and responsibility in its wake.





According to The Mental Health Foundation, the reasons why men, and particularly those who are fathers to young children, don't generally talk about their mental health are manifold.

Societal expectations and traditional gender roles play a role in why men are less likely to discuss or seek help for their mental health problems. Men are often expected to be the breadwinners and to be strong, dominant and in control. While these aren't inherently bad things, they can make it harder for men to reach out for help and open up.

Some research also suggests that men who can't speak openly about their emotions may be less able to recognise the symptoms of mental health problems in themselves, and less likely to reach out for support. Men may also be more likely to use potentially harmful coping methods such as drugs and alcohol and less likely to talk to family or friends about their mental health.



Recent research conducted by innovation charity Nesta found that fathers of young children rank especially high amongst those reporting increased levels of financial anxiety. Almost half of the fathers interviewed said that they had experienced a noticeable decline in their state of mental health since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak.

These factors, amongst others, appear to be directly contributing to the growing mental health crisis amongst dads in the UK. Those who contact me for support mostly do so because they find themselves increasingly struggling with feelings of anxiety and/or low mood. Those with young families find it especially hard to cope, believing that as the man of the household they should be strong enough to deal with just about anything and everything that life throws at them, hence the difficulty that many fathers have in admitting that it might be time to seek professional help.

### RECOGNISING THE WARNING SIGNS

**So, what might be some of the potential indicators that it could be time to ask for help?**

- Feeling worried or anxious a lot of the time
- Losing sleep, or sleeping too much
- Changes in mood, appetite or energy level
- Feeling unusually angry, impatient or irritable
- Engaging in compulsive or reckless behaviour
- Difficulty concentrating, feeling restless, or on edge
- Feeling flat, lethargic and generally disengaged
- Becoming withdrawn and losing interest in normal activities
- Obsessive thinking or compulsive behaviour
- Feeling sad, hopeless or suicidal
- Increased reliance on drink or drugs

### DON'T SUFFER IN SILENCE

Admitting the need to reach out for help is the first and biggest step in the process of getting your life back on track. Just talking to someone you trust about the difficulties you are experiencing can often be the best way forward, and if you find yourself worrying about your ability to cope, try speaking with your GP at the earliest opportunity. Alternatively, there are



various organisations of support that are ready and willing to listen, by phone, text or email - up to 24 hours a day. One of the most common things I hear men say when they take that first tentative step towards reaching out for help is, "I don't know where to start." The truth is, it really doesn't matter, because by reaching out for that support they have already taken by far the biggest and most important step on the road to recovery.

## PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

But what about the impact of a father's mental health struggles on his kids, you might be wondering. Won't they see it as a sign of weakness? Might it not be storing up problems for them in the future? The Mental Health Foundation recommends that children and young people should be given clear, factual information about a parent's mental health problems, and that children have been found to feel less anxious when they are told the truth.

Author and speaker Matthew Williams knows only too well how difficult it is to

balance the natural instincts of being a good dad with the struggle of dealing with a mental health crisis. "I expect we all fantasise about being a superhero sometimes, but even Superman has kryptonite.

As parents we wish to shield our children from the harsh realities of the world for as long as we can; sometimes any choice in the matter is taken away from us. At such times it is easy to beat yourself up (it's what a depressed person does most of the time) for failing to protect them, for exposing them to the painful struggle that life can sometimes become."



## TURNING CHALLENGE INTO OPPORTUNITY

Despite the difficulties Matthew faced in trying to shield his children from the impact of his depression, he later came to realise what a valuable learning opportunity this had been for them.

"Like in any challenging situation, there is also an opportunity. We get to show them that adversity can be overcome. That pain will pass. That life is not about never getting knocked down, it is about how you pick yourself up to go an extra round.

And maybe learning that Daddy isn't a superhero has laid a solid foundation for greater lessons; in overcoming adversity, in enduring through times of struggle, and in recognising the importance of our family in helping us through our dark nights of the soul."

Matthew now regularly writes and speaks about his experience of mental health issues, and he has just launched Change, an online personal development course aimed at helping those who wish to work towards building themselves a better future. More information can be found at [www.afamiliarstranger.co.uk](http://www.afamiliarstranger.co.uk).

## SOURCES OF SUPPORT

If you find yourself struggling to cope, the following organisations offer free and confidential advice and support by telephone and online. Regional branches of MIND and other local counselling and support agencies are also on hand to listen and help those who are in crisis.

- **CALM** 0800 58 58 58 Helpline and webchat available 5pm to midnight every day [thecalmzone.net](http://thecalmzone.net)
- **Samaritans** 116 123 (24 hours) [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)
- **Maytree** A sanctuary for the suicidal 020 7263 7070 [www.maytree.org.uk/index.php](http://www.maytree.org.uk/index.php)
- **MIND** 0300 123 3393 (Mon – Fri 9am – 6pm) [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- **Papyrus** Prevention of Young Suicide 0800 068 41 41 (Mon – Fri 10am – 5pm / 7pm – 10pm. Weekends 2pm – 5pm) [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

## IMMEDIATE HELP

If you're feeling in despair, or fear that you may be in potential danger of harming yourself, Samaritans are there to listen in confidence 24 hours a day on 116 123, or visit [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org). ❖

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