

## Keeping it real

### Reimagining mental health care for all young men

Suicide is the leading cause of death among young men (aged 15-24 years) and the life expectancy of men with a mental disorder is 15.9 years shorter than their peers.

Young men continue to use mental health services at a proportionally lower rate than young women. Mental health services have to be reimagined for young men so that they:

- recognise the symptoms young men have and the role of masculinity
- are relevant and acceptable to young men and 'reach in' to their lives
- are co-designed with young men themselves.

#### KEY ISSUES

There is growing recognition that for young men, symptoms of mental ill-health manifest through externalising behaviours including anger, alcohol and other drug use and risk-taking rather than affective symptoms such as feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness. As such, their symptoms can be missed as they do not fit diagnostic criteria.

Traditional masculine norms, such as being tough and self-reliant mean that many young men learn to avoid expressing emotions or behaviours that show vulnerability. These dominant social norms have also been identified as a barrier to health professionals recognising mental health problems in men.

The experiences of young men can be shaped by their identity and personal context. Mental health risks can be exacerbated for young men from non-Western cultural backgrounds, who identify as sexuality diverse or experience learning difficulties for example.

Experiences of anger, when disproportionate and repeated, can be a signal of mental ill-health in young men and may trigger a need for mental health care. Aggression, however, can be a barrier to service access. A new approach is needed that facilitates young men's engagement while ensuring the safety of health workers.

“ Men are seen as you know hard, sturdy, you know, nothing can faze me sort of thing you know. Men, I've got a big shield on my chest. But it's not always like that.

Young person

#### Health effects

A lower incidence of mood disorders yet higher rate of suicide among young men suggest that depression may be underdiagnosed.

Differences in symptomology have been identified as masking the true incidence of mood disorders, in particular depression among men.

Symptoms found in young men include:

- higher rates of alcohol and other drug use as a coping strategy;
- risk-taking behaviour; and
- anger.

## REIMAGINING SERVICES

Novel initiatives are needed to reimagine how services reach young men who are not following traditional help-seeking pathways. Engagement is more likely to be successful when services are co-designed with young men themselves and reach into their lives.

Services need to:

- recognise that a young man's behaviour may be a symptom of mental ill-health;
- enhance the role of peer support; and
- develop the potential of digital technologies.

### Recognising the symptoms

Primary and specialist health professionals need to be aware of the potential link between mental ill-health and externalising behaviours when assessing young men. Recognition of the potential for presenting symptoms that do not align with existing diagnostic criteria requires training for health professionals and the use of assessment tools specific to young men.

The potential effect of traditional social norms related to masculinity (i.e. being tough or self-reliant) also need to be recognised. These effects can include: reduced emotional expression, greater mental and physical health risks and lower rates of help-seeking. Recognising the role of masculinity can enable positive forms and expressions to be offered to young men.

### Peer support

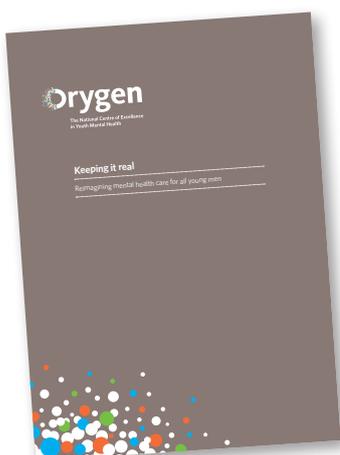
The circles of support around a young man have the potential to provide a safety net for those experiencing mental ill-health. Peer support running parallel to clinical care can strengthen this support and facilitate engagement.

In some instances positive reinforcement within a peer group setting can be more effective than individual counselling. School-based programs that, in a safe environment, support male adolescents to develop awareness of their emotions and empathic responses may provide a foundation for self-awareness and alternate interpretations of traditional masculine norms.

### Digital solutions

High rates of internet access and smartphone usage has made new technologies a focus of innovation in mental health services. Current evidence that new technologies will facilitate higher engagement from young men is, however, mixed.

Realising the potential of digital technologies will require the coordination of research into what works. The development of acceptable and effective services and treatment for young men must be informed by what engages young men in other digital fields, such as gaming.



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