

The New Approach to Men's Mental Health

By Greg Presto

Your guide to identifying the subtle and surprising ways mental health impacts your life—and the science-supported strategies that can help you feel better.

There's no denying that men's mental health issues are woefully undertreated. [Fewer than half of men in the U.S.](#) suffering from clinical conditions like depression and anxiety seek help, making women [1.6 times more likely](#) to use mental health services.

This has dire consequences. While the prevalence of mental health issues is generally higher in women, men are [3.5 times more likely to commit suicide](#).

What's going on here? Is it nature or nurture? Is it because men have traditionally been conditioned to "tough it out"? Or is there something inherently male about prioritizing stoicism over emotional vulnerability?

The truth is, it's probably [a mix of biology, environment, and culture](#). But, in a lot of cases, the reasons for men not seeking help are poorly understood. What we know for sure is that no one can "walk off" clinical depression or debilitating anxiety.

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Aaron Karpman, Psy.D.

"Men need to look at the brain like any other part of the body; it can be injured," says Aaron Karpman, PsyD, a therapist with Meru Health. "You wouldn't walk around—

with a broken arm for years without having it fixed. Yet we stigmatize and delay the treatment of mental health."

Making matters worse, ignoring mental health problems can lead to pain, certain cardiac conditions, sleep problems, and other ailments.

What if part of the solution was to accept that mental health isn't just mental—that it's part of physical fitness and vice versa?

"The mind and body are one unit, and we need to start approaching health that way—looking at people as a mind-body, not just a body with a mind," says Dr. Priyanka Wali, medical director for Meru Health.

In this guide, you'll learn more about the link between mind and body and discover how new approaches that combine caring for both can help men live better, healthier lives all around.

4 Common Physical Symptoms Often Linked to Mental Health

Saying that the mind and body are one isn't wordplay: Research shows that some mental health experiences may predict physical health outcomes. For example, those who have experienced a number of childhood traumas have an increased risk of early death and chronic medical issues, Wali says.

Mental health challenges can have physiological roots, too: "The death of a loved one, divorce, a pandemic...all of these can affect the body's stress hormone cortisol," she says. Normal levels of cortisol are good—in addition to helping [regulate blood sugar, blood pressure](#), and the [sleep-wake cycle](#), cortisol helps us stay [alert and energized](#) in times of stress. But when you're chronically stressed, an overabundance of cortisol [can increase the number of inflammatory markers in the brain called cytokines](#). According to a [2022 review in the journal Biomedicines](#), this is one cause of depression. Chronic inflammation is also considered a significant contributing factor in the development of [diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and arthritis](#).

Bottom line: The body and brain don't act independently. Anyone experiencing any of the following common physical symptoms should consider its possible link to their mental health.

1. Gastrointestinal Distress

Numerous [studies](#) show that people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, and it's not just because chronic diarrhea or constipation may cause mental anguish. [For decades](#), scientists have known that chronic stress plays a role in the intensity of IBS symptoms and that [treating depression](#) symptoms helps reduce the severity of IBS.

"When we use the term 'gut feeling,' that's a real scientific phenomenon," Wali explains. "There are neuroreceptors in our gut." These protein structures receive messenger chemicals—like serotonin and norepinephrine—that are involved with feelings and mood.

Take action: If you have [symptoms of IBS](#) that aren't linked to a spicy meal gone bad, see a medical provider for an assessment. (It's worth noting that while IBS commonly occurs in men, [many tend to not report symptoms](#) to their doc.)

2. Feeling Burned Out

Burnout and depression have some overlapping symptoms, but burnout is different in that it's often [brought on by work](#). "If you think of your work and feel a sense of dread, that can be a sign of burnout," Karpman says.

Other signs include fatigue and feeling mentally exhausted, less productive, cynical, and disengaged from the tasks you're supposed to do.

Burnout poses physical risks, too. [A 2017 research review](#) of 61 studies found that people with burnout are more likely to suffer from coronary artery disease, type 2 diabetes, and high cholesterol. For people under 45, burnout also poses an increased risk of death.

And a [study in *Psychosomatic Medicine*](#) found that people experiencing burnout have lower levels of heart rate variability (HRV), a measure of the regularity of the space between heartbeats. A low HRV has been associated with physical ailments, [such as headaches](#), and mental health concerns [like anxiety disorders](#).

Take action: Many wearables, like Apple Watches and Fitbits, track HRV. If you notice your HRV is low and you can't shake your bad mood about your 9-to-5, consider working with a therapist.





3. Trouble Sleeping

Scientists are finding that [sleep troubles may lead to mental health issues](#). People with obstructive sleep apnea (a breathing disorder that causes disturbed sleep) [are more than three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression](#) than people without sleep apnea. People with insomnia are [10 times more likely](#) to experience depression and 17 times more likely to experience anxiety. Worse, [complaints of poor sleep are a risk factor for suicide](#).

Mental health concerns may also manifest as sleep problems. Research shows that periods [of extreme stress](#) can impact sleep quality and that having repetitive, negative thoughts—a symptom of both depression and anxiety disorders called [rumination](#)—can [lead to insomnia](#).

Take action: If you're getting less than six hours or more than eight hours of sleep most nights, you may not be getting optimal sleep. See page 5 for tips to get your zzzs back on track.

4. Hypertension

It's no myth that stressful situations can raise blood pressure: A [2019 study published in BMJ](#) compared siblings. Those who had stress-related disorders (such as PTSD and acute stress reaction) were 16 percent more likely to also have hypertension (high blood pressure) than their siblings who didn't have stress-related disorders. Over time, high blood pressure increases the risk of [heart attack, heart failure, stroke, vision loss, and sexual dysfunction](#).

[Half of American men](#) have hypertension, or blood pressure readings of 130/80 or higher. While many have high blood pressure for medical reasons (ranging from family history to diet to kidney disorders), daily stress and mental health may also factor in. "Lots of things [associated with our mental health] can raise blood pressure: inadequate sleep, chronic pain, and stress. Cortisol raises inflammatory markers, which can raise blood pressure," Wali says.

Take action: Hypertension is a silent killer. Check your—

blood pressure at least once every two to five years—more often if you have a family history or other risk factors. Buy a cuff to use at home, find a machine at a local pharmacy, or see your physician.



The New Science of Feeling Better

Mental health affects every aspect of men's lives. Luckily, today you have more options than ever to access the tools you want and need for support.

Mental health care has seen multiple revolutions: The first wave began with psychotherapy. The second wave added medication. The third wave introduced online prescription services and telehealth appointments to deliver medication and therapy digitally.

The fourth wave is being pioneered and defined by Meru Health, says founder Kristian Ranta, who [lost his brother to suicide](#) in 2005. The digital 12-week program blends mindfulness and evidenced-based therapies, app-based therapist support, and self-paced lessons and practices to help people address their current mental health issues. The unique program also equips Meru users to handle future challenges, much in the same way that a physical injury (like a broken leg) might require six weeks in a cast followed by physical therapy to strengthen the body in order to heal and help prevent future injury.

Among the key components of the Meru Health approach are:

1. Mindfulness Practices

[Mindfulness](#) describes a state of being present in the current moment and aware of our surroundings, thoughts, and feelings without judgment. The ability to focus in this way [has been found](#) to improve psychological well-being.

Practicing mindfulness regularly can help us in our daily lives by providing a space between a stimulus and our response, Ranta explains. “[Our reaction] is often knee-jerk based on our history. And it’s not something you necessarily want to do or be. Mindfulness helps people detach from their thoughts and stop that reaction.”



Try It Now: 5-4-3-2-1 Practice

Karpman recommends this simple practice for feeling more present and less stressed in the moment.

Look around the room where you are. Notice:

- Five things you can see
- Four things you can hear
- Three things you can touch
- Two things you can smell
- One thing you can taste

2. Biofeedback

You’ve likely felt your heart racing when you’re nervous or excited. With biofeedback, you can train your mind to—

slow your heart rate and, in turn, [reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression](#).

[Biofeedback](#) is when technology, such as a heart rate monitor showing your pulse or an ear clip that measures HRV and displays it on your phone, provides biological information in real time. Biofeedback exercises help you modify your breathing and see how that directly impacts your heart rate or HRV. With regular practice, you can become less reactive to stressful events.

Try It Now: 4-7-8 Breathing

No biofeedback monitor? No problem. “You can actively think about something and increase or decrease your heart rate and skin temperature,” says Philippe Goldin, PhD, a psychologist and clinical adviser to Meru Health. Relax your body and your mind with this breathing exercise.

1. Breathe in through your nose for a count of four.
2. Hold your breath for a count of seven.
3. Breathe out through your nose for a count of eight.

Repeat three times up to four times a day.

3. Nutrition

Our bodies need the right balance of nutrients to support physical and mental health. For example, [one study](#) found that people are more likely to be depressed when the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids in their diet is too high. (Omega 6 fatty acids are found in soybean and other vegetable oils, while omega 3s are found in fatty fish like salmon.) [Research also associates](#) the risk of depression with deficiencies in vitamin D, multiple B vitamins, calcium, iron, magnesium, and zinc.

“You can’t talk yourself out of that.”

Kristian Ranta, CEO of Meru Health

Therapy alone can’t undo depression caused by nutritional deficiencies. “Roughly 20–30 percent of people who have a vitamin B12 deficiency will develop clinical depression,” Ranta says. “You can’t talk yourself out of that.”

That’s why the fourth wave of mental health care includes nutritional analysis and dietary changes. Scientists have found that [supplementing omega 3s can help people with certain types of depression](#). And depressed patients who begin following a Mediterranean diet—which is rich in seeds, nuts, fish, and leafy greens—[have seen improvements in their symptoms](#).

4. Sleep hygiene

This isn’t a measure of how clean you are at bedtime. It’s the environment you sleep in and the things you do before bed. Generally, it’s best to:

- Keep your sleeping area cool, quiet, and dark
- Go to bed around the same time each night and wake up the same time every day, even on weekends
- Stop eating a few hours before bed
- Avoid blue light—emitted by TVs and phones—before sleep

5. Chat Therapy

Face-to-face psychotherapy is [effective](#) at reducing depression and anxiety symptoms, but finding an hour to spend with a therapist can be challenging for many. It’s sometimes tough to schedule and can be expensive, Karpman says.

The fourth wave of care recognizes these barriers and offers an alternative: texting with a therapist, also called “asynchronous chat.” In a small [study](#) by Columbia University scientists, nearly half of patients who used text therapy saw a remission in their depression and anxiety symptoms. And [a 2017 research review](#) found that blending talk and text therapy can lead to better results than either therapy alone.

[Learn more about how Meru Health’s fourth-wave care can help you.](#)

Mental Health Resources for Men

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

- Call 988
- Access confidential support if you're having suicidal thoughts.

Crisis Text Line

- Text the word "HOME" to 741-741
- Connect with a trained crisis counselor.

National Council on Problem Gambling Helpline

- Call 1-800-522-7400
- Talk to a counselor if you're having problems controlling gambling.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline

- Call 1-800-622-HELP (4357)
- Get support for substance abuse problems.

211

- Call 211
- Connect with a confidential representative to learn about local social services, including mental health care.

GriefShare

- Call 1-800-395-5755
- Find a support group with others experiencing grief.

Navigating a Mental Health Crisis

- [Download this FREE guide](#)
- Explains what is considered a mental health crisis and lists strategies and resources to help.

Meru Health

- [Sign up](#)
- A 12-week therapeutic skills program that includes chat-based support from a licensed therapist (no need for scheduled calls), self-paced practices, and biofeedback.

Myths About Mental Health

Seeking support is far from being "weak"—and that's hardly the only misconception men tend to have about mental health. Here are four more myths and the science that debunks them.

Myth #1: Talk therapy is always the best option.

Psychotherapy can work, but—especially with the challenges of cost, finding a provider you click with, and scheduling—it's not for everyone. That's why fourth-wave providers combine therapy with approaches such as mindfulness training, and biofeedback. "Trauma energetically gets stored at a cellular level and remains in the body," Wali says. "It has to be released. You have to do some body-based practices to help people deal with their issues."

Myth #2: Anyone who is depressed should take antidepressants.

"If you're feeling suicidal or unable to get out of bed, antidepressants can be a godsend," Karpman says. "But most of the time, we are depressed not because of a medical problem, but because of something environmental—we're grieving, we're unhappy with our job, we're not communicating well with the people around us..." In these instances, medication might improve depression symptoms, but "you don't learn what might have made you depressed or how to fix it," Karpman says. That's where therapy comes in.

Myth #3: Depression is in your head, so you should be able to think your way out of it.

First, physiological symptoms (like nutritional deficiencies) and your environment (like [poor air quality](#)) can lead to depressive symptoms. Second, even when depression is primarily psychological, your thinking is a bit skewed when you are depressed, Karpman says. That makes it difficult to find solutions to change your outlook on your own.

Myth #4: There's nothing you can do about burnout.

[Studies have shown](#) that mindfulness practices can decrease symptoms of burnout and stress. [In a 2018 study](#), biofeedback training with an HRV device helped university students reduce burnout symptoms and improve school performance in four weeks.



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