

## Men and their health

*What is it with men? They excel in so many areas in life – business, sport, the arts, but so many fail miserably to look after their health, particularly their mental and emotional health!*

Is it that they find it difficult to relate to anything other than the physical? Maybe, but its only in the last 5 to 10 years that men have started taking some responsibility for their own physical health through regular blood pressure, cholesterol, prostate, testicular and skin checks.

Is it that they expect others to do it for them? Maybe, but when it comes to organizing a trip away with their mates or the materials needed for a project around the house they don't seem to have any trouble doing it for themselves.

So, what is the problem? Well, I think it has a lot to do with a lack of understanding about who we are! Male identity has always been defined by what a man does and what he knows rather than who he is. To this end it is very easy to find a man who will tell you in great detail what he did yesterday while he was fishing (what he does) or even express his opinion (what he knows) about government policy but quite rare to find one who will talk about what he feels, listen to the response and then respond to what has just been said, thereby engaging in conversation about his well-being or his '*dis-ease*'.

The connection with health is that to actually be interested in your own health requires pausing or stopping what you are doing, learning to hear your own inner wisdom and listening to others, then embarking on a journey of self discovery of your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. Very few men have a role model for this type of process so it may be difficult to know where to start. My suggestion is to talk to someone close to you, asking them to listen without judgement and be interested in what they have to offer. The aim in doing this is to establish a connection at the '*feeling*' level. So, instead of – saying you feel fine (when you don't); acting grumpy and leaving the room (not communicating at all); being silent (when you really want to connect with someone close to you) – tell someone how you really feel .....lonely/crowded, supported/unsupported, overwhelmed/content, depressed/joyful or anxious/relaxed. If you are experiencing a particular problem or difficulty that is causing you considerable angst its important to remember that you do have the necessary resources and strengths to work through the issue – its just a matter of learning how to access these 'parts' of you by opening up to others and being prepared to accept advice where appropriate.

Men talk about three myths that act as barriers to seeking help. **Firstly**, that they will somehow fall apart if they get in touch with their feelings. **Secondly**, that once they start talking they won't be able to stop. **Thirdly**, that they won't know what to say when there is an opportunity to do so. From my experience if a reasonable level of trust exists between two people, then the fear of appearing vulnerable can be managed with respect and a meaningful dialogue can take place. Many men describe this type of communication as being a powerful release of tension - something like the shedding of a heavy weight from their shoulders.

Whether you are discussing something with your partner, a friend, trained professional or just observing your own patterns of behavior the aim should be to achieve '*insight*'. Insight into the problem area provides the impetus for change by stimulating the imagination to create possibilities for the future. The mind (through thinking) and the body (through feeling) begin to imagine the new circumstances and how the situation will be different to the way it is now. It is important when considering how you will make changes in your life to have a sense of what the consequences of your actions will be and then to decide whether that is really what you want. It can be very useful at such times to write down any thoughts that occur to you and a brief description of the feelings you notice in your body as you imagine the new scenario. This may help to clarify your purpose and establish a starting point.....and remember always be prepared for new discoveries throughout the process!

How do you achieve the insight I hear you ask? **Counselling** is one practical method of finding solutions to many of the difficulties confronted in modern living by providing 'time out' from our normal routine – a period of time when you can let go of responsibilities and freely express your beliefs and attitudes to a trained professional. Through this type of process you can develop some objectivity about your own life and make the necessary decisions to resolve any issues. Counselling involves face to face discussion and may also include the completion of 'task assignments' between sessions. Task assignments often require self-observation of your patterns of behavior, the way that you think and feel about relationships and how capable you are of relaxing.

Relaxing your body and mind to a deep level is a skill worth developing. To learn how to do this consult with a professional or take the time to observe your own experiences through the course of a normal day. The good news is that there are opportunities to do this everyday as we all experience moments of relaxation regularly. Some examples are the state of mind you enter into when listening to music, performing physical exercise, daydreaming, noticing your breathing or just simply being aware of what you are thinking and doing when you are completely by yourself. With practice you can train yourself to be more aware of your thoughts and feelings and how you have responded to situations in the past – in other words, begin to assess what works and what doesn't. You can then decide whether to continue on with previously tried methods (that have worked) or to do things differently and learn new behaviours.

The moment of insight has occurred when something you were unaware of becomes conscious – '*it*' is now '*in sight*'. So go ahead – talk with someone close to you or consult with a practitioner and be prepared for change!