

Tip Sheet

Men and emotions

Our emotional state often dictates how we behave.

Men and women may handle emotions in quite different ways. When upset, women are more likely to express their feelings directly and to seek the support of friends and family, whereas men might hide their emotions or withdraw.

Men often feel that they need to be self-reliant and provide for their loved ones, so it is not appropriate to express their emotions. This behaviour can be reinforced in the stereotype of the heroic male, so often represented in popular culture. Fearless, resourceful, stoic and usually facing adversity alone, these characters tell us a lot about what is considered to be ideal male behaviour within our society.

More powerful than film characters are the roles we see our parents playing. Many men have experienced fathers who were emotionally distant, who rarely, if ever, cried or expressed affection outwardly. The way we see our parents behave may become the unconscious template for our behaviour.

The four basic emotions

It is helpful to think in terms of four basic human emotions:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Happiness
- Fear

Of these four emotions, happiness is considered the most acceptable in society. Yet anger, fear and sadness are universally felt by everyone.

These emotions serve valuable purposes and are normal responses to threat and loss.

As emotions such as fear and sadness are generally not as accepted, men might try to hide these from themselves and those around them. They feel that they should be able to cope on their own.

Individuals might try to cope with 'negative' emotions in one or more of the following ways:

- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Working longer hours
- Spending more time away from home
- Consuming more alcohol
- Behaving recklessly and/or violently

We might not always be able to identify what we're feeling or have the words to describe our emotions. Men may feel uncomfortable talking to someone about them, leading to frustration in relationships when they cannot express their needs, fears and grief.

Why talk about it?

The restriction of emotional expression in many men's lives can lead to:

- A greater sense of isolation
- Less support being available from loved ones
- Health issues, due to carrying chronic tension in the body and other bad coping strategies
- Relationship difficulties due to an inability to resolve emotional conflicts or a perceived lack of ability to be intimate
- Psychological problems such as depression, insomnia and anxiety.

Getting in touch

Men are often told they have to 'get in touch with their feelings,' but what does this mean and how do you do it? Here are some strategies for getting to know your feelings better:

- Be aware of the sensations in your body. Emotion always manifests somewhere in the body. Anger might be experienced as a flush of heat in the face, sadness as a tightening of the throat, anxiety as a knot in the stomach. Take a moment to acknowledge the feelings and take a few breaths to help identify these sensations and understand what they mean.
- If you are feeling angry, ask yourself what other emotions you might be feeling? Are you really sad underneath, or afraid?
- Learn to put words to what you are feeling. Often it helps to write down or brainstorm ideas before a conversation.
- Identifying and expressing feelings is a learnt behaviour – and like driving a car, it takes practice.
- Take the risk of showing your vulnerability with people who you feel safe with. Give yourself permission to be human; it can bring you closer to others and may even bring a sense of relief.
- Ask for help when you need it. You can start by contacting counselling services such as MensLine Australia, for professional support.

MensLine Australia is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with professional counsellors providing information and support for all relationship issues. Call us on **1300 78 99 78** or visit mensline.org.au.