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INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that men have traditionally been quite poor in caring for their mental health.

While this trend now appears to be changing among younger people as a result of a decade-long public awareness campaign, I don't think the same can be said about older men. People of my age and older are still of a generation where mental illness was highly stigmatised and rarely spoken about, and this still affects how men in our community are engaging with their mental wellbeing.

Mental health problems are extremely common and not something that an individual should feel ashamed of having to deal with. In many ways mental health is an issue that is associated with all transitions in life. We observe mental health problems in men who are entering into new relationships, starting families, enduring marital discord and separation or divorce, experiencing a change in their work roles and transitioning into retirement and old age.

So, considering the prevalence of mental health issues across the community, why does such a stigma still exist? Stigma arises from ignorance and prejudice and it sets up discrimination and shame. Stigma is dangerous; it remains a major barrier to people seeking the clinical support that they need.

While I do think stigma is slowly disappearing, there still remain groups of men that are at particular risk of feeling shame and marginalisation as a result of having a mental illness.

More work needs to be done in this space and we all have a role to play to reduce stigma. Reach out to others who you think may be struggling, listen to their situation and, most importantly, educate yourself about mental health.

This booklet represents an introductory look at the intersection between men's health and mental wellbeing, including a number of practical tips that we can all take on board. The key messages are clear: there is no shame in having a mental health problem; hiding such issues doesn't make them go away, it makes them worse; mental health problems are treatable; and you should seek help as quickly as possible.

There is no shortage of support available for anyone dealing with a mental health issue. Once upon a time, getting information about mental health problems was extremely difficult and could only be obtained by contact with a health professional. Now, a number of resources are available online, from headspace to beyondblue to SANE Australia.



Associate Professor
Simon Stafrace
**Director,
Alfred Psychiatry**

I hope this booklet will add to your understanding of mental health and will encourage you to learn more about a topic that has been so misunderstood. Enjoy.

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Understanding mental health	6
Facing stigma head on	8
Overcoming stress	10
The dangers of addictive behaviours	14
The best medicine	18
Healthy eating for a healthy mind	22
Entering fatherhood	26
Gary's story	30
Mental health as you age	33
Getting help	37
Acknowledgements	39



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UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health is a lot more than the absence of mental disorders or disabilities. Instead, it is a central component of an individual's overall health and wellbeing.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his role in the community'.

A person with good mental health feels capable of dealing with the regular stresses that they experience in everyday life, has more meaningful relationships with those around them and exhibits a positive outlook towards the future.

Research shows that high levels of mental health are associated with increased learning, creativity and productivity, as well as an improved physical health and a greater life expectancy.

WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM?

Mental health problems impact on the way that you feel, think, behave and interact with others. They range from the pressures that we feel on a daily basis to more long-term conditions.

Examples of mental health problems include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviours.

Each year, one in five Australians will be diagnosed with one of these mental conditions. However, if we think more generally about some of the more common mental health problems, including stress and grief, then this proportion could be even higher.

It is important to recognise mental health problems as conditions, not weaknesses.

COMMON DEFINITIONS

Stress: considered a 'process, not a diagnosis', stress is our body's response to a challenging situation. Stress can be experienced physically, emotionally and behaviourally.

Depression: a mood disorder categorised by persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest. It can affect the way that you eat, sleep and feel about yourself and others.

Anxiety: feelings of nervousness, apprehension and fear. These emotions can manifest into real physical symptoms.

Schizophrenia: a disorder involving a breakdown in the connection between thought, emotion and behaviour. It can generally lead to feelings of mental fragmentation and delusion.

Bipolar mood disorder: a condition involving severe low and high moods as well as changes in an individual's sleep, energy, thinking and behaviour.

Addictive behaviours: often associated with the development of an addiction, this involves behaviour, or a stimulus related to behaviour, that is rewarding and reinforcing.

Post-traumatic stress disorder: a form of anxiety disorder developed after a traumatic or distressing event.



WHO IS AT RISK?

There is no easy way to determine the individuals who are most at risk of developing mental health issues.

The determinants of poor mental health include a range of social, environmental and biological factors. These drivers can include many of life's most common and ordinary experiences, including stressful work conditions, family pressures and lifestyle changes.

When we consider that 35 per cent of Australians last year reported a significant level of stress in their lives, it is clear that mental health issues routinely affect us all.

The facts and figures

- On average, one in eight Australian men will have depression
- On average, one in five Australian men will experience anxiety
- The rates of mental illness of men can sometimes be misleading – prevalence is often higher than it appears, as many cases are misdiagnosed or undetected
- Anyone can be affected by a mental illness and no one is immune to these problems.

POOR MENTAL HEALTH WARNING SIGNS

The best way to take action against mental health problems is to be aware of the warning signs at their earliest stage.

Although there is a broad range of emotional conditions, some common warning signs can include:

- a disrupted sleep-wake cycle
- long hours of work
- feelings of isolation
- a cluttered and worried mind
- less attention to exercise and diet
- a loss of enjoyment for activities once considered enjoyable.



MEN AND MENTAL HEALTH

Men account for 75 per cent of deaths by suicide in Australia.

While not all men with mental issues are at risk of suicide, such a damning statistic goes some way in demonstrating Australian men's complicated relationship with their mental wellbeing. Generally speaking, men exhibit low rates of mental health literacy and rarely seek help when they need it. More often than not, they feel stigmatised when doing so, and this acts as a significant barrier in achieving good health.

While men are less likely to suffer from mental health problems than women, they are traditionally less likely to seek help. At any one point, there may be two-thirds of men who don't seek help for anxiety and depression.

FACING STIGMA HEAD ON

Individuals experiencing a mental health issue are often faced with discrimination as a result of their diagnosis.

This is the result of stigma. That is, a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance or person. According to the accounts of many people living with a mental illness, stigma can affect them as significantly as their symptoms.

Stigma is extremely common throughout society, particularly in relation to mental health. In fact, three out of four people with a mental illness report feeling stigmatised. Stigma can be seen in various different forms throughout the community – some are based on negative attitudes or beliefs, while others are the product of a lack of understanding or misinformation.

When someone feels stigmatised, they experience feelings of shame, hopelessness and distress. Stigma can even affect those who have not even been diagnosed with a mental health issue. Currently, the fear of experiencing such stigma remains one of the most significant barriers deterring men from reaching out to others about their wellbeing, including friends and family, their GP and other healthcare professionals.

THE MALE PSYCHE

We know that it is very difficult for a man to acknowledge that he has a mental health issue and consequently, 70 per cent of men don't even seek treatment – a clear indication of the stigma associated with mental illness. A strong component of this stigma is undoubtedly linked to the traditional male psyche and social norms of masculinity.

Australian males are often embarrassed to admit that they are enduring emotional distress or battling with a health issue, especially when they feel their problems should be something that they can sort out themselves. Men are traditionally seen as being quite competitive; they don't want to expose anything about themselves that they think could be perceived as a 'weakness'.

This approach may be even worse if they come from a culture where male expression and candidness is particularly uncommon.

Additionally, men can often be solution-focused: if they identify a problem, they want a solution. They want direct results, rather than spending time reflecting on their situation and opening up about their personal issues.

TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH:

- educate yourself about some of the most common mental health conditions, including each of their respective warning signs and symptoms
- recognise all mental health issues, including stress and anxiety, as important matters of concern requiring your attention
- take active control of your own mental health – pursue positive lifestyle changes and treatment solutions earlier rather than later
- learn from the experiences of others; engage with the broad range of resources available
- don't be afraid to reach out to others for help and guidance, including friends, family and healthcare professionals
- be wary of stigma – acknowledge mental health in the appropriate fashion, support others and offer support
- develop healthy coping mechanisms to enlist when under emotional distress.

'You are taught from a very young age that you should be strong, you should stick up for yourself and you should never show weakness. Whether it's through sport or another aspect of your life, this mindset is quite culturally ingrained. There are pros and cons to this mentality – it's actually not a bad way to live if things are going fine, but it can cause problems if things aren't going so well.'

Dr Paul Denborough, Child and Youth Psychiatrist

HOW TO COMBAT STIGMA

Get the facts: educate yourself about mental health; educate others, challenge attitudes and behaviours.

Be a source of support: communicate with those who may be facing mental health problems and demonstrate your willingness to listen and lend a hand.

Quality care: offer the same support to people with a mental illness that you would if they were physically injured or unwell.

Choose your words: understand the impact of your words; don't reduce people to their diagnosis or condition.

Inspire others: if you have been affected, share your story; celebrate and accept difference.

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OVERCOMING STRESS

One of the most common forms of emotional hardship comes in the form of stress.

Stress is a normal part of everyday life; none of us can get through our life without experiencing some degree of stress, whether its origins are connected to work demands or family/social pressures.

With the potential to affect you at any age, stress can be a key predisposing factor to all major categories of emotional distress and mental illness. It certainly affects mood and can lead to mood and anxiety disorders as well as social withdrawal. In severe cases, it may precipitate psychotic symptoms and syndromes in those people who have a predisposition to such disorders.

ARE YOU STRESSED?

Besides being completely natural, feeling some degree of stress, particularly around work, can often be beneficial. We tend to only get the best of ourselves when we are under some degree of pressure to perform – it acts as a great motivating factor. If there is no pressure, then there is no impetus for us to reach our peak.

However, the key is to try and find ways of stopping the pressure become too excessive.

It isn't always easy to ascertain if you are under excessive stress, particularly for those with extremely stressful and deadline-driven jobs, **but if you think that you are dealing with too much stress in your life, you probably are.**

Similar to the symptoms experienced with other mental issues, the signs of excessive stress can vary from person to person, but some common indicators include:

- headaches
- muscle tension/pain
- upset stomach
- changes to your appetite
- anxiety
- fatigue
- sadness/depression
- an inability to switch off thinking about work pressures
- reduced libido
- sleep issues
- irritability
- social withdrawal
- increasing drug and alcohol use
- spending longer hours at work (beyond the expected norm).

Last year, the Australian Psychological Society surveyed a number of Australians to appraise the primary causes of distress in their lives. The survey found that the top five causes of stress were:

- personal finance
- family issues
- personal health
- trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle
- issues with the health of others close to us.

'A lot of people are stress jockeys – they really thrive and enjoy working in a stressful environment. Many go home and switch off from work, spend time with their family and are present in the moment. However, many can't and they struggle to detach themselves from work-related stress and it shows. This is something that partners can especially notice in their man. They may not be sleeping the same, they may be stress-eating, they may seem irritable and vacant and they may enjoy things less.'

Associate Professor Rob Selzer,
Consultant Psychiatrist

COPING MECHANISMS

Considering the prevalence of stress in each of our lives, we all need to develop strategies to deal with stress to keep us healthy and functional.

Coping strategies can be defined as the things that you do when you get stressed. They can be adaptive (good ones) or maladaptive (bad ones).

Good coping mechanisms include acknowledgement, communication with friends and family and the pursuit of a healthier work-life balance. Bad strategies include unhealthy distractions, withdrawal, substance abuse and inappropriate displays of temperament and anger.

TIPS TO REDUCE STRESS:

- seek out information
- understand the warning signs
- be attuned to what your body is telling you
- don't shy away from the issue
- talk with friends and family; listen to what they tell you
- get enough sleep
- pursue mental downtime
- exercise
- check out some relaxation exercises
- put a limit on things that are bad for you (eg, too much coffee, alcohol, etc).



'I wasn't a sporty person at school, so exercise and physical activity wasn't habitually one of my coping strategies for stress – I was a bit of a late player in the game in that sense. But what has struck me since I have become more active is just how beneficial it is for stress. Physical activity has direct effects on the cardiovascular system, excretory system and it certainly improves brain functioning, focus, cognition and sleep.'

Dr Leo Chen, Consultant Psychiatrist

THE FIVE MOST POPULAR WAYS OF DEALING WITH STRESS WERE:

- watching television/films
- listening to music
- focusing on the positives
- reading
- spending time with friends and/or family

OVERCOMING STRESS

A WORKING LIFE

We tend to put a lot of emphasis on the work that we do. How often have you been introduced to someone with your first name and occupation? In the same way, how often have you met someone for the first time and asked, 'what do you do?'

Particularly for men, a person's occupation can form a significant part of their identity. While this isn't necessarily unhealthy, it can often lead to a tendency to over-prioritise work duties to the detriment of the other important aspects of your life.

Try to be aware that your work is not completely representative of who you are. Work shouldn't necessarily give your life complete meaning; it should give you an income, but it is never the primary thing that defines you as a person.



WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Although 'work-life balance' can mean a number of things to different people, recent reports suggest that it remains central in the minds of Australian workers. In fact, research by SEEK indicates that half of us have actually changed jobs in search of a better balance.

However, despite our attention, Australia has consistently ranked quite low in comparison to other countries in respect to quality work-life balance, with many workers feeling pressured into working longer hours and on top of that, experiencing job insecurity.

Studies show that the stress associated with 'workaholicism' has links to a wide range of poor health issues, including anxiety, insomnia and heart disease.

There are a number of strategies that we can adopt to attain a healthy balance in our lives.

Set priorities, use your diary. We all have access to a calendar that we can use to keep track of our lives – whether it's on your phone or through your work email system. Whenever we record something in our diaries, we are more likely to do it. Furthermore, if we include others in our plans (for example, a regular exercise partner), we are more likely to stay true to that schedule so as not to let them down.

Maintain your friendships. Men are very good at keeping focused. So much so, that when work or family responsibilities can get too much, spending regular time among friends is often the first activity that we overlook. Spending time with mates is an important activity in our lives, not only because we enjoy doing it, but because it gives us the opportunity to engage with like-minded people who usually have experience enduring similar stressors and life experiences.



Don't judge yourself against others. Too often we tend to compare ourselves to those around us or those individuals better than us. This affects our own happiness and sense of emotional wellbeing. Instead, try to be more inwardly focused.

Look after yourself. Focus on healthy eating and healthy living. Again, use your diary as much as possible. Make sure you schedule time for physical activity, as well as shopping to ensure you don't always need to grab that 'easy' food option.

Don't do something because someone tells you to do it; do something you enjoy. Try and find activities or hobbies that you enjoy. This will make you more likely to give them priority in your life and fall into a regular cycle.

THE DANGERS OF ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS

One of the most hazardous coping strategies that you can employ when dealing with stress is engaging in addictive behaviours, including alcohol and drug use. However, for a significant percentage of Australians, this has been a common method to alleviate stress and other anxieties.

The Australian Psychological Society's Stress and Wellbeing Survey 2015 found that:

- of those reporting severe levels of distress, 61 per cent drink alcohol, 41 per cent gamble, 40 per cent smoke and 31 per cent take recreational drugs to manage stress
- of those reporting extremely severe levels of depression symptoms, 57 per cent drink alcohol, 46 per cent gamble, 41 per cent smoke cigarettes and 38 per cent take recreational drugs to manage stress

- of those reporting extremely severe levels of anxiety symptoms, 66 per cent drink alcohol, 54 per cent gamble, 47 per cent take recreational drugs and 45 per cent smoke cigarettes to manage stress.

Statistics indicate that men are at far greater risk of developing problems with addiction than their female counterparts – ranging from drinking and smoking to gambling and drug use.



MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS

Research shows a tremendous degree of overlap between mental health issues and addiction problems.

We know that, across the board, people with mental health problems are at a far greater risk of developing substance abuse and gambling problems than those without such issues.

Similarly, we know that people with substance and gambling problems are far more likely to have had a pre-existing, often undiagnosed, mental illness before they develop their addiction.

Some of the warning signs exhibited by an individual struggling with addiction problems include:

- social withdrawal
- disproportionate time spent using substances or gambling
- missing work/absenteeism
- lying to others to conceal behaviour.

ALFRED STATE-WIDE GAMBLING SERVICE

Since its establishment in 2009, The Alfred's State-wide Gambling Service has provided care and support to hundreds of Victorians battling addiction and mental health issues.

Funded by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, the service represents a collaborative partnership between Alfred Health, Gamblers Help Southern and the Monash Alfred Psychiatry research centre.

The Alfred's Evan Symons has been the Consultant Psychiatrist for the service since its inception. Reflecting on the service's development, he explains its initial impetus was born out of the growing knowledge surrounding the relationship between addiction and mental health.

'About 10 years ago there was an increasing awareness of the comorbidity of problem gambling and mental health issues. Many people who were identifying themselves as having a gambling addiction turned out to have a mental illness as well, particularly depression or anxiety,' Evan says. 'Similarly, we knew that for people with major mental illnesses, their risk of developing a gambling addiction was about five times the risk of the general population'.

With research acknowledging the strong intersection between both issues, it wasn't long before collaboration was sought across the two clinical fields.

'We recognised that mental health services probably needed to learn a little more about problem gambling; and that gambling services needed to learn a little more about mental health comorbidity, screening and risk,' he says.

The result is a service that Evan now describes as 'innovative' and 'unique across the world'.

'We see clients and patients referred by any health professional who identifies that they have a mixture of gambling problems and mental health issues,' he says. 'Most of the patients that we see are men who have presented to Gamblers Help and have actually turned out to have a previously undiagnosed, significant mental health comorbidity.'

Education also forms a strong component of the service's work, with Alfred clinicians providing support and training to a range of healthcare professionals, including mental health services, GPs and Gamblers Help counsellors.

Evan points to the success stories emanating from the service's work as evidence of the successful collaboration underpinning the initiative and an indication of the significance of its work for the future.

'There have been a number of men referred to the service who have had undiagnosed depression underlying their gambling addiction. Once we provided treatment for their depression, we found that, with the resolution of their mental health issue, their gambling addiction also improved substantially,' he says.



THE DANGERS OF ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS

APPROACHING OTHERS

One of the greatest challenges clinical psychiatrists face in terms of providing treatment for people with addiction problems pertains to the fact that intervention can only begin in a meaningful way once the patient has truly recognised that they have a problem.

If you think your loved one may be struggling with addiction, it is important to articulate to them that you are worried about their wellbeing. If your concern can be framed around their health, rather than emotion, then that is ideal. Sometimes it may be difficult to talk about someone's addiction without expressing negative emotion, but you should focus on conveying to your loved one that you are concerned for them and want to help them seek professional support.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER INCLUDE:

- the problems facing an individual with addiction issues are very common
- there are evidence-based treatments available (including both psychological and pharmacological treatments)
- the problems that one is experiencing do not represent a character flaw - they are not weak because they have this problem
- if someone has sought support, they have already demonstrated strength and self-awareness
- many people have gotten through these issues and have gotten better.



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THE BEST MEDICINE

Regular exercise can be used as an effective strategy to relieve or lessen one's stress, anxiety and mild depression. Not only does routine exercise make you feel better physically, it can help distract you from the negative thoughts that often feed emotional issues. Additionally, there is evidence that regular exercise and changes in physical fitness alter serotonin levels in the brain, release endorphins (the body's natural painkillers) and lead to improved mood.

By achieving a number of physical and health goals, exercise can also help improve your confidence and self-esteem.

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

Any exercise you do is beneficial for your health.

You don't need to be an international athlete to get the most health benefits from exercise. In fact, the greatest health benefits can be achieved by those simply pursuing an average fitness level. Of course, the fitter you are, the more health benefits you will achieve; however, there will be diminished returns.

The core message is simple: you don't need to be a high-level athlete to reap the health rewards of physical activity.

HEALTH BENEFITS

The reported health benefits of exercise for middle-aged men include:

- reduced risk of cancer, particularly bowel cancer
- reduced risk of heart disease
- reduced risk of type 2 diabetes
- reduced depression
- increased ability to quit smoking
- longer life expectancy.

'The benefits of exercise far outweigh the risks. There are benefits in terms of minimising the risk of cancer for middle-aged men, particularly bowel cancer. There is a reduction in depression. There's an increased ability to quit smoking. There are overall mortality benefits. People often say that if exercise was a medication, it would be the "wonder pill" because it improves health in so many ways.'

Associate Professor Andre La Gerche,
Head, Sports Cardiology



How to get started

- Commit to being active on your feet. All physical activity counts.
- Use a pedometer to count your steps. It's been found that just by using a pedometer, the amount of physical activity that you engage in will increase.
- Build up your exercise routine; start small.
- Have goals. Aspire to reach certain milestones.
- Take regular 'health breaks' at work or at home. Try not to sit for long periods of time.
- Ask your employer about sit-stand desks and workstations. Standing has been shown to have considerable health benefits.

YOUR HEART DURING EXERCISE

Exercise has important benefits for heart health.

When you exercise, your body needs more oxygen. As a result, all the cellular pathways that use oxygen improve. The body becomes better at using oxygen.

A bit like blowing up a balloon and letting it down again, the blood-flow during exercise stretches your circulation. The process keeps the body's circulatory system rubbery and compliant. It's really important that your blood vessels aren't stiff; exercise stretches them.

The more activity that you do, the younger you keep your blood vessels, the younger you keep your heart muscle and the more your enzymes are able to use oxygen. The result is that you feel fitter and you feel better.

'I wasn't a sporty person at school, so exercise and physical activity wasn't habitually one of my coping strategies for stress – I was a bit of a late player in the game in that sense. But what has struck me since I have become more active is just how beneficial it is for stress. Physical activity has direct effects on the cardiovascular system, excretory system and it certainly improves brain functioning, focus, cognition and sleep.'

Dr Leo Chen,
Consultant Psychiatrist

QUICK TIP

Building a routine

The best exercise you can engage in for your health is the one that you will do again tomorrow and then the day after. It's all about regular activity. This makes it even more essential that you find an exercise that you enjoy participating in, as this will no doubt boost your likelihood to keep active.

Generally, team sports have been found to have the most health benefits for participants, primarily because people are more likely to incorporate it in their lifestyle and continue on a regular basis.

MENTAL HEALTH AND HEART HEALTH

The relationship between your mental wellbeing and the state of your heart is more closely linked than we sometimes realise.

People with heart disease have an increased risk of psychological problems and depression. At the other end of the scale, people who are very fit and as a consequence have better heart health, have lower rates of depression.

However, like all statistical relationships, these associations are not definite. You could be the fittest man in the world and have depression and vice versa.

THE BEST MEDICINE

OUR CHANGING BODY

The natural wear and tear of ageing can often stop us from taking part in our favourite pastimes and activities.

Not only does this stop us from doing something we find enjoyable, but the threat of chronic injuries can often put us off engaging in physical activity all together.

As we age, we need to be more sensible when it comes to engaging in sport. It goes without saying that the sport or exercise routine that you engaged in during your 20s isn't going to be appropriate as you enter into middle-age or your later years.

This is where choosing an appropriate alternative is so important.

So, if you were an avid runner but chronic shin injuries have meant you can't go for a run as often as you once did, maybe think about donning the Lycra and going for a ride. If you are used to going to the gym three times a week, but your lower back is playing up, maybe it's about time you tried yoga or Pilates?

A degree of variety can be fundamental in ensuring you remain active.



'As you get into activity when you are older, you have to be sensible. When some guys decide they are going to get fit, they go full tilt and before they know it, they have picked up an injury in the first week. Then they can't continue the activity, so they stop altogether. As we get older we are prone to injury and as a consequence, less likely to exercise.'

Associate Professor Rob Selzer, Consultant Psychiatrist



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HEALTHY EATING FOR A HEALTHY MIND

Your diet plays a significant role in your overall health and wellbeing and can also potentially influence your emotional state. Not only does nutrition play a protective role for your body, it can also have negative effects depending on what you are consuming.

Having a well-balanced diet can help you retain a healthy weight, achieve good physical and mental health and reduce your risk of chronic disease.

NUTRITION AND MENTAL HEALTH

While the connection between an individual's diet and mental wellbeing are far from concrete, there is emerging evidence that suggests that nutrition plays an important role in mental health. Recent research suggests that high intakes of fruit, vegetables, fish and whole grains may be linked with a reduction in the risk of depression. Additionally, another study indicated that people who eat more processed foods are more likely to experience anxiety.

We are still not sure what comes first: good diet and good mental health or stable mental health and a subsequent tendency to eat well.

There is evidence to suggest that stress affects how you eat – both enhancing and diminishing your appetite. Some research has found that individuals that experience acute stress lose their appetite, whereas someone experiencing chronic or long-term stress is more likely to crave energy-dense foods (foods that have a high fat or sugar content).

DIET AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Currently, over 70 per cent of Australian men are overweight or obese. Being overweight can increase the development of chronic disease, including colorectal cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Cardiovascular disease is currently the biggest killer of Australians. Killing one Australian every 12 minutes, conditions that fall under this category include all heart, stroke and blood vessel diseases.



RESOURCE TIP

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating is a series of dietary guidelines based on the most up-to-date research evidence. Presented in an easy to understand format and accessible to the general public, it is a valuable resource to draw on to develop healthy nutrition habits to reduce your risk of developing a chronic disease.

Your dietary requirements should change depending on your gender and age, and the guide takes this into account.

For more information, go to eatforhealth.gov.au

TIPS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF YOUR DIET

Eat your fruit and vegetables

Less than half of Australian men are meeting the recommended serves of two pieces of fruit a day. To make matters worse, less than four per cent of men are meeting the recommended daily serves of vegetables.

Fruit and vegetables are valuable sources of fluid and fibre. Incorporating them in your diet can help prevent against colorectal and bowel cancer.

Watch your red meat intake

Lean red meat is a beneficial component of the diet, providing a great source of nutrients including iron, zinc and B12. However, recent national surveys have found that men are currently consuming too much red meat. It has been found that consuming more than 100/120g per day of red meat can be linked with an increased risk of high cholesterol and colorectal and renal cancer. Just make sure you choose lean red meat, with the fat removed, and consume about 65g per day or 120g every second day. Variety is key, so try to include alternative protein sources to red meat like fish, lentils, chicken, tofu and eggs.

Eat more fish

Fish consumption has been shown to have a number of health benefits. There is some evidence suggesting that eating fish more than once a day can reduce your risk of Alzheimer's. In fact, some research has found that eating fish more than twice a week can have even more benefits, including reducing your risk of stroke and heart disease.

Remember: a serve of fish can be a can of tuna or salmon – it doesn't need to be a fillet.



DESIGN YOUR PLATE

Australian men may be in need of changing their portion sizes, rather than cutting foods out of their diet completely.

Alfred dietitians contend that a perfect plate formula could be:

- 50% of your plate filled with non-starchy vegetables, which can include leafy greens and other coloured vegetables such as carrots or tomatoes
- 25% of your plate comprised of protein, which can include meats, eggs, chicken, lentils or beans
- 25% of your plate made up of carbohydrates, which can include rice, potatoes, pasta and couscous.

By following a plate formula like this, you are increasing your vegetable consumption (consequently reducing cardiovascular risk factors), as well as reducing your caloric intake (as meat is naturally heavier in calories).

HEALTHY EATING FOR A HEALTHY MIND

KEEP IT COLOURFUL, NOT RESTRICTIVE

Dietitians will always tell you that variety and balance are cornerstones of healthy eating. Not only does it allow your body to consume a range of foods from each of the essential food groups, but it also helps keep a diet from getting stale or boring.

Eating a range of vegetables is particularly important in allowing your body to consume as many vitamins and nutrients as possible. For example, if you are eating a lot of orange vegetables, like carrots or pumpkins, you may be getting enough vitamin A but not enough vitamin K, which is found in leafy greens. Generally, different vegetable colours indicate different nutrients.

Take-home tip: try for three different coloured vegetables for each meal.



CONSUME MORE CALCIUM

There is misconception that osteoporosis, a disease that causes brittle bones, only affects women, however it is still a prominent issue in older men. As men get older, it is important that they consume three and a half serves of dairy each day to maintain their bones. Our bones become a lot less efficient at holding onto calcium as we age, so if you don't have enough calcium, you are putting yourself at risk. Men less than 70 years of age require 2.5 serves of dairy; men over 70 require 3.5 serves. A serve of calcium can be as easy as a glass of milk, a small tub of yoghurt, or two slices of cheese.

DRINK A LOT OF FLUIDS

Sometimes when our body feels thirsty we mistake this feeling as hunger and try to treat it by eating. Most people do not drink enough fluid.

Our fluid requirements are generally based on our body size.

An individual's estimated fluid requirements are 35–45ml/kg. Therefore, a 75kg man requires approximately 2.6–3.4L a day. Most people tend to consume much less than this.

As a general rule, the recommended daily fluid intake for men is 2.6 litres.

EAT MORE PROTEIN AS YOU AGE

As we age, we are less able to develop and build muscle. As a result, we need to eat more protein to retain lean muscle mass. Men less than 70 years of age require 64 grams of protein per day, while those over 70 require up to 80 grams. Some fantastic protein sources include, fish, meat, poultry, eggs, tofu, nuts and legumes.



FOCUS ON FIBRE

It is quite common to experience gastrointestinal issues as you get older, often leading to bloating and constipation. To combat these problems, one should try to consume foods high in fibre, including vegetables, fruits and wholegrain breads (as a rule of thumb, the whiter the bread, the less fibre it contains).

Hint: to include more fibre in your diet, leave the skins on vegetables as you cook them.

Make sure that you add fibre to your diet in addition to fluids. Without adequate fluids, the benefits of fibre are greatly diminished.

STAY SAFE ON BOARD TRAMS



ENTERING FATHERHOOD

One of the most extraordinary and fulfilling periods in a man's life takes place when they first become a father; however, despite the positives, this time brings with it new pressures that can impact their emotional state.

The changing role of the father

Over the past 20–30 years, across a number of segments in society, there has been a decided shift away from the 'traditional' family construct – the male as the 'breadwinner' and the female as the 'childrearer'. Instead, more and more new fathers are happily embracing a more active and hands-on form of parenting, affording them a greater opportunity to enjoy the experience of raising a child.

However, while this degree of involvement offers positive experiences and can greatly benefit a man's mental disposition, it also provides a number of stressors that, if not managed properly, can impact one's state of mind. These stresses include potential conflict or tension between partners over roles and responsibilities, time pressures and sleep deprivation.



'For most men, the best thing that they can do in their life is to have a child ... it is an awesome experience. Sometimes it can be a bit of a blur, especially considering you are quite often sleep-deprived, but I think that when you reflect back on those years, it can quite often be the best time of your life. For a while you may not be connecting with people of your own age, but it's also a period where you can embrace the fatherhood experience. Get the most out of it ... time goes quickly.'

Dr Paul Denborough,
Child and Youth Psychiatrist

SOCIAL ISOLATION

It goes without saying that new parents often find themselves time-poor, particularly if one or both are juggling work commitments on top of their parenting duties.

However, it appears that men are finding it difficult to juggle the competing demands of family and work with other aspects of their own personal lives. This is most notable in their tendency to discontinue involvement in physical activity or their favourite hobbies, as well as their inclination to disengage from their usual social networks.

Although completely healthy, as a new father you should be careful not to make this behaviour an ongoing habit. Over time, such a tendency can lead to unhealthy feelings of social isolation and emptiness and if not acknowledged, can greatly affect your state of mind in later life.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Discuss parenting with your mates – try to reach out to friends going through similar life experiences
- Always communicate with your partner
- Be mindful of your sacrifices
- Be mindful of your partner's sacrifices
- If possible, plan time for yourself
- Keep in touch with friends – draw on technology, use social media, stay connected
- Recognise negative behaviour and feelings early on, and take action

'To be honest, every man would have experienced an element of that with the remarkable journey of fatherhood. Personally, now that I have four children at the age that they are attending school, I realise that I'm "reconnecting". Having a large family is a heroic choice. I gave up many of my social commitments – I did yoga; I was a big runner. Now I feel deeply connected and satisfied in my family relationships. I'm also beginning to see another horizon, with my new insights and time to spare for my own interests and good health, I'm enjoying the investment in more social connection and exercise.'

Dr Nicolas Mims,
Consultant Psychiatrist

RAISING AN ADOLESCENT

As your child reaches their teenage years, a new set of challenges arises for you as a parent.

Stereotypically, men have an inclination to want to remain in charge of their family unit. So much so, that it can come as quite the shock when their child goes through a period often categorised by argumentative and independent behaviour.

Feeling frustrated at the loss of control over your son or daughter as they age is only natural. Parenting teenagers is quite demanding, but it is important that you adopt the best approach in order to protect your relationship with your child, as well as ensure you diminish the stress on both you and your family during this time.

It is completely normal to find that you are spending less time with your child during their teenage years, especially as they gain more independence. So while it may seem that your role as a parent is becoming less important, don't stress. Your relationship with your child is only changing and with this transition, can come new opportunities for connection.



ENTERING FATHERHOOD

TIPS

- Anticipate that adolescence is a challenging time for the child; expect them to potentially become more augmentative, distant and independent.
- Form a strong, close relationship with your child before they reach adolescence – key to this is spending quality time with them.
- Understand that you don't need to be in your child's face all the time; there may be periods where your child may want space. Just be there; it's a fine balance.
- Attempt to maintain some form of connection with your kids during adolescence even if they may be trying to pull away.
- Communicate with your partner and work as a team.

BE A TAXI SERVICE

Many parents groan when asked by their teenager for a lift to a party on a Saturday night or shudder at the cross-country treks that come hand in hand with Saturday morning sport. However, the humble 'drop off' may hold a lot more significance than you think.

Whether the drive is accompanied by discussion or involves simply listening to music, it provides a unique opportunity to engage with your child in a very different, intimate environment. At the end of the day, it's an opportunity to be together and maintain a form of communication.

EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

Empty nest syndrome—the sadness experienced when a child moves out of home—is usually associated with mothers, yet this condition can affect fathers a lot more profoundly than conventional wisdom has led us to believe.

As discussed earlier, today's generation of young dads are a lot more focused on father-child relationships. If we couple that with some of the traditional ideas underpinning masculinity and fatherhood (think 'leader' and 'provider'), it becomes clear that the process of parting with your child can lead to some degree of distress.

However, there are a number of things that men can keep in mind to combat empty nest syndrome and instead, approach change in the healthiest possible way.

Accept change. You must recognise that your role as a father has not stopped; it has just changed. While there may be negatives, there may also be positives. You need to adjust.

Stay connected. Try your best to keep a periodic connection with your kids. Do you share any similar interests that you can tap into? Perhaps make it a regular thing.

Make it fun, not an obligation. Try and make your interaction with your child fun and interesting. Don't make either partner feel morally obligated to keep in touch; make it more organic. Find activities that are mutually enjoyable to do together.

Become a handyman. A great way to keep healthy, regular connection with your child is making yourself available to help out with anything that requires an extra hand. Do they need help moving into a new house? Does all their new furniture from IKEA need putting together? Do your grandchildren need babysitting?

Redefine your marriage. Your marriage can often become too focused on your child and this comes at the expense of your relationship with your partner. Use this time to reconnect with your wife and pursue many of the goals that were once considered pipedreams. Maybe it's time for that European holiday?

Be sensitive to your partner's feelings. Remember your partner is experiencing the same feelings as you. Be aware of how she is handling the change.



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GARY'S STORY



Strength and support: Gary and his partner, Belinda

GARY'S STORY

It was 1:30am when Gary suddenly awoke and immediately asked to be driven to The Alfred Emergency and Trauma Centre, fearing that he would 'do something silly' and potentially hurt himself.

Just like thousands of men in the Australian community, Gary has a mental illness. His spur-of-the-moment admission into The Alfred's Trauma and Emergency Care Unit late last year was yet another chapter in this ongoing battle – a struggle that he now believes first began following the passing of his father in 1979 as a result of bowel cancer.

Looking back, Gary says that the emotional burden he experienced at the time eventually grew to consume the entirety of his formative years.

'I always seemed to have a negative outlook; I couldn't find positives. I wanted to talk to someone but, at that age, I didn't know what help was available to me,' he explains. "Mental health" wasn't really a term widely used ... you were simply "stuck in a rut" or "going through a rough patch" ... you had to work things out for yourself.'

Unfortunately, for a lot of men of Gary's generation, this attitude continues to exist.

'Being able to speak freely about mental health is not a tool that most men have at their disposal,' Gary says. 'Not only does stigma stop men talking about their health, it can also lead men who may be suffering from a mental illness to not even know it.'

'That's where it gets dangerous.'

Such circumstances prevented Gary from pursuing any form of professional support until he opened up to his GP at the age of 35. By this time, he had endured a number of severe emotional hardships, including a divorce and a major surgery, which had significantly affected his already vulnerable disposition, ultimately leading to 'suicidal thoughts'.

Diagnosed with major clinical depression, Gary received psychological treatment for a 12-month period. The care, which included pharmaceutical intervention, had a positive effect on his wellbeing. So much so, that at the end of the 2009, he chose to stop seeking professional support.

'I thought that I was in a much better place and had improved enough,' Gary remembers. 'It's a bit like medication – you take it for a while and you feel better, so you stop.'

Upon reflection, Gary admits this decision was a driving factor in the subsequent deterioration of his mental health, ultimately culminating in his admission to The Alfred.

'I now see regular psychological treatment like a tune up for your car,' he says. 'If you keep it maintained, you will be ok. However, if you neglect it, things have a chance to wear and you pay the bigger price down the road.'

While Gary has grappled with depression all his life, his recent diagnosis of borderline personality disorder – a condition categorised by severe distress, isolation and self-harming behaviour – has added extra significance to his ambition to attain good mental health. He continues to see both a psychologist and a psychiatrist through The Alfred and works tirelessly to remain active and motivated.

Gary's message to other men struggling with mental health is two-fold: communicate with others, and never give up fighting.

'Nobody knows what you are thinking. You need to put your heart on the table and admit that you need help. A lot of people feel insecure about asking for help. Men especially don't want to talk about mental illness – they think it's being weak. But it's a courageous move. You have to verbalise it, because if you don't, the alternative isn't a nice place to be in.'



MENTAL HEALTH AS YOU AGE

There is no doubt that as you get older you will have to manage a new raft of pressures and challenges that can greatly affect your mental state. In a similar sense, it is no secret that men have traditionally struggled during this life transition, with the highest rate of suicide seen across the Australian community occurring in older men (80 years and older).

In a recent survey conducted by the Australian Psychological Society examining older Australians, it was reported that the most common challenges facing this population were:

- keeping their physical health and fitness
- maintaining social networks
- coping with feelings of sadness and loss
- guaranteeing financial stability
- dealing with the need to rely on others
- coming to terms with a decrease in mobility.

Your approach to the above challenges can go a long way in ensuring that you age positively.

Positive ageing is maintaining a positive attitude as you age. It's about feeling good about yourself, remaining fit and healthy and living life to the fullest.



RETIREMENT

One of the greatest contributors to a man's physical and emotional wellbeing is his involvement in satisfying and meaningful employment. Work allows a man to feel productive, valuable and gives him an opportunity to make friends within a social setting.

With this in mind, retirement has long been seen as a danger period in a man's life. When they stop working, they can often lose a degree of their own self-identity and begin to feel empty and lost.

Additionally, if a male has been too overly devoted to work and family responsibilities throughout their life as a parent – at the expense of their own social networks – they may find this stage of their life particularly daunting.

RELATIONSHIP PRESSURES

Retirement also brings forth new challenges in a man's relationship with his partner. It goes without saying that when one or both parties retire, the amount of time they spend together increases significantly. This new level of intimacy can often cause natural tension as both parties struggle to adjust to the new situation. Issues may involve space, conflicting routines and the need for joint decision-making.

Like all relationship issues, communication remains key. For couples to overcome the above challenges they should engage in open communication, negotiate and pursue compromise and be understanding of each other's perspectives.

MENTAL HEALTH AS YOU AGE



DEALING WITH ILL-HEALTH

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, approximately half of all Australians are currently living with a chronic disease. Additionally, 20% of the Australian population has at least two conditions.

A chronic disease relates to a group of diseases that are long-lasting and have persistent effects. Diseases in this category include arthritis, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease.

We know that as you get older, your chances of being affected by a chronic disease increases. For many older-aged men, sickness or disease can challenge their coping skills, and generate feelings of inferiority and weakness.

COPING WITH LOSS

Enduring loss is an inevitable part of life. This feeling is perhaps most obvious when it is experienced following the passing of one's own mother or father.

For many, the loss of one's parent can be a watershed moment in their life. While retirement has traditionally been seen as the period in a man's lifetime where the risk of mental ill-health reaches its peak, the powerful feelings of grief felt when one loses a paternal figure should not be ignored as a significant transition.

'Grief' is a feeling of intense sadness or sorrow, usually experienced following a significant change or loss. Most commonly, it can be caused by someone's death.

Grief affects everyone differently. For some, they may experience shock, anger, anxiety and guilt. Others may find themselves feeling lethargic or, in contrast, suffering from sleeplessness.

Understanding and recognising grief may not necessarily diminish its effects, but it will enable you to more healthily adjust to your loss.



HOW TO HELP YOURSELF

- Talk to others about your feelings
- Be patient with your own feelings; don't expect too much, too soon
- Educate yourself about grief and how it can affect you
- Focus on your own physical and emotional wellbeing; make time for yourself
- Trust your instincts; do what is right for you.

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MENTAL HEALTH AS YOU AGE

TIPS TO AGE POSITIVELY

Stay positive: keep a healthy mindset – the way you feel about the ageing process can so often dictate your likelihood to pursue healthy behaviours.

Keep your connections: the relationships that you form with people around you have an immense impact on your overall mental wellbeing, so keep in touch with your friends and family.

Develop new social connections: get involved in activities or pastimes where there exists an opportunity to meet and engage with other like-minded men.

Give something back: many older Australians find it rewarding to engage in volunteer work or part-time employment, particularly if the result of your involvement has some form of benefit for the community.

Keep fit: pursuing an active lifestyle not only has immense health benefits but, depending on the activity, can have a number of emotional benefits (including social inclusion and mindfulness).

Develop a healthy diet: healthy eating is integral as you age, not only to improve energy levels but to maintain a healthy weight and ward off health conditions.

Get regular check-ups: by having regular medical check-ups and tests, as well as engaging in illness prevention (healthy eating, not smoking), you can reduce the possibility of being affected by chronic disease.

Know your limitations: it is only natural that you will find yourself unable to do many of the things that you were able to when you were younger. Keep an open mind to change. Everyone experiences it, so don't feel ashamed.

GETTING HELP

HOW TO GET HELP

Your general practitioner (GP) is your number one resource and the best first port of call if you feel you might need to talk to someone. GPs have a wealth of experience in managing mental health problems as they see lots of people who are struggling with psychiatric difficulties each day.

Your GP will rely on their accumulated experience, medical know-how and understanding of you to get a sense of what might work. This might be something as simple as another visit to continue the chat. While all GPs have a broad training that includes mental health, some have a particular interest in mental health and may have completed extra courses or have additional qualifications in family therapy, meditation-based therapies such as mindfulness, or other talking therapies.

If your GP has completed some form of further training, they might offer to continue to see you for talking therapy, also called psychotherapy. More often than not though, they will recommend you see someone else for psychotherapy and will make a referral or draw up a mental health care plan for you.

Your GP might refer you to a psychiatrist, a specialist medical doctor who has done further training in managing mental illness using either psychotherapy, medication or a combination of both. However, your GP will most likely refer you to a non-medical psychotherapist under the Better Access to Mental Health Care Plan. Under the Better Access plan, Medicare rebates are made available for up to 10 sessions of therapy in each calendar year, making psychotherapy an affordable and appealing option.



There are other ways that one can get help in the event you don't have a GP, or for some reason don't want to see one. There are a number of not-for-profit organisations one can speak with. While your GP is likely to be the best source of information in regards to the services available, your local community health centre is also somewhere you can go to ask about what is available.

A number of crisis support services are available for those in desperate need of someone to talk to. Lifeline can be reached on 13 11 14 and is a 24-hour service for those in distress. Mensline on 1300 78 9978 is a counselling service for men with family or relationship concerns.

Beyondblue.org.au, sane.org and minetworks.org.au are some of a number of great online sources of information.

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GETTING HELP

For those under 26 years of age, headspace centres located around Australia offer a walk-in service for younger men who might have a question about their mental health. Additionally, Eheadspace.org.au is an online resource for those unable to access one of these centres. Kids Help Line on 1800 55 1800 offers a counselling service for those aged between five and 25.

In the event that you, or someone you care about, are struggling with a severe mental health emergency, your local public hospital can help. Almost every public hospital across the state has a 24-hour psychiatric triage telephone service staffed by mental health clinicians. They are able to provide advice about how best to proceed with accessing appropriate care in the event of an emergency.

At The Alfred, our psychiatric triage service is available 24 hours a day on 1300 363 746. A mental health clinician will answer your call and provide you with advice about accessing emergency psychiatric care for yourself or someone you are concerned about. They are best placed to deal with more urgent mental health problems and are not a counselling or referral service. Less urgent problems are obviously best taken to a GP or discussed with one of the many agencies listed above.

As a last resort, you could always visit your local emergency department (ED). Public hospital EDs are open 24 hours a day and tasked to address whatever emergency health problem might arise. The ED is not where one wishes to find oneself if it can be helped, but as a last resort is better than nothing.

'Therapy comes in many shapes and sizes and can provide help for a range of problems, including moderate forms of depression, anxiety, phobias, substance abuse, anger management, personality disorders, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. It can also help with grief and loss, dealing with trauma in early life, managing a mid-life crisis or indeed any other crisis and alleviate general dissatisfaction.'

Dr Donovan Moncur,
Consultant Psychiatrist

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet was produced with the help of Alfred hospital staff:

- **Associate Professor Simon Stafrace**
Director, Alfred Psychiatry
- **Dr Donovan Moncur**
Consultant Psychiatrist
- **Dr Evan Symons**
Consultant Psychiatrist
- **Associate Professor Robert Selzer**
Consultant Psychiatrist
- **Stephen Marum**
Psychiatric Consultation and Liaison Nurse
- **Dr Nicolas Mims**
Consultant Psychiatrist
- **Dr Paul Denborough**
Child and Youth Psychiatrist
- **Dr Leo Chen**
Consultant Psychiatrist
- **Associate Professor Andre La Gerche**
Head, Sports Cardiology
- **Professor Jayashri Kulkarni**
Director, Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre
- **Meg Skelton**
Dietitian
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