

Even the words “men” and “depression” don’t seem to go together. It is much more common to hear about a woman who is struggling to get out of bed, being in constant tears, and/or having extreme feelings of guilt and worthlessness than a man. Depression used to be considered a “woman’s disease”, which was linked to hormones and premenstrual syndrome.

However, researchers estimate that at least six million men in the US suffer from a depressive disorder each year.

Men & Depression



Yes—6,000,000 men. This number is likely to be underestimated for many reasons including the fact that men don’t typically admit emotional upset or seek medical and/or mental health care as readily as women do, therefore leaving the actual statistics somewhat up to the imagination. We all know there are exceptions to the rule, but in the case of depression, there are many reasons why a diagnosis of depression affects more men than we might commonly think.

Basic Symptoms

Due to heightened awareness of depression over the last decade most folks can now identify several symptoms of depression. The soft, bouncing dot on pharmaceutical commercials (which is represented as a ‘unisex’ dot, by the way) has helped to create an understanding between a “happy” vs. “sad” dot depending on how it bounces. The most common symptoms of depression include low self-esteem, low mood, loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities, suicidal thoughts, fatigue, changes in appetite (including weight gain or loss), difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbance, and general apathy and sexual problems, including a reduced sex drive. These symptoms must be serious enough to create disruption in relationships and/or interfere with work or daily activities for no less than two weeks in order to meet criteria for a formal diagnosis of depression.

Depression is also categorized in several different levels depending on the seriousness and frequency of episodes, as well as the duration of symptoms. Generally, individuals must meet a minimal number of criteria (ie., symptoms) in order to be assigned a formal diagnosis. Depressed people are thought to withdraw from life and life activities until they feel they are

in an overall abyss of helplessness. However, in the case of male vs. female expression of depressive disorders, the picture becomes more complicated in that although the symptoms of depression are similar for both men and women, they tend to be expressed differently. This varied expression often eludes both patients and untrained professionals, resulting in a missed diagnosis or even a mis-diagnosis.

“The Depressed Planets”

Just as Mars and Venus, depressed males and females may appear to come from completely different planets. One of the most common differences in male vs. female depression is none less than mood. Women tend to experience a noticeable lowering of mood, complete with unpredictable bouts of crying, excessive sleep, slowed movements/decreased energy, and feelings of sadness, apathy, and worthlessness, whereas males tend to be more angry and irritable with likely (but uncharacteristic) outbursts, sleeplessness, agitation and restlessness, suspiciousness and guardedness, and an overall increased need to feel in control.

While the female expression of depression might represent the characteristic withdrawal from the world, men tend to become more active, but in a potentially self-destructive way. This may include blaming of others (females blame themselves), a general hostile demeanor (women become more mildly tempered) with verbal and/or physical attacks toward others, and a use of alcohol, TV, sports and sex to self-medicate (females generally rely on food, friends, and “love” to soothe themselves). It is also not uncommon for a depressed male to become immersed in work, logging a huge number of hours resulting in

little time at home or with family. While wives and kids may assume that they are simply workaholics, it may be that they are seeking a safe haven from their emotions since in a man's world work tends to allow for an avoidance of feeling and thinking.

Other ways that men may differ from women in their experience of depression includes their self-perception. While women tend to feel guilty for what they do, men tend to feel ashamed for who they are. They also report a strong sense of failure, while women generally have a stronger fear of success. Men also tend to look outside of themselves for answers to depression—they believe their problems could be better solved if their spouse, friends, coworkers, etc. would treat them better or do more for them. In contrast, women believe their problems could be solved if they could somehow be better people. Also, while depressed women tend to feel like they have no control (i.e., helplessness), men who are depressed tend to seek ways to increase control (becoming compulsive with work or tasks around the house such as yard work, use of substances, etc.). This is likely due to males feeling vulnerable to admitting weakness; however, in turn, they over-

compensate while seeking control.

Peak Performance

One of the main differences between males and females with regard to depression relates to overall identity. It seems as if men maintain a healthy state of mind when they feel they can perform well, whether at work, at home, on the court, or in the bedroom. (A healthy female feels that she has a strong voice and is able to make herself "heard" to others.) Depressed men appear to question their abilities and sense of efficacy in tasks more than depressed females, who tend to question their ability to be good people.

Depression can have a direct impact on sexual desire and performance. For depressed women it is common to report a loss of libido—or interest in sex overall. Although this is sometimes the case for men, they generally report a loss of sexual performance as a more disturbing side effect of depression. To further complicate matters, men are often unwilling to report sexual problems because they often relate loss of performance to their manhood rather than a possible medical or mental health problem such as de-

pression. This is evident in an example from an observation I did in my past job as a faculty member who taught family practice residents. In that job, I would shadow 1st year residents in their clinic to help them learn how to integrate behavioral medicine into their practice. A gentleman in his 50's came for a follow-up appointment and although reluctant, had admitted he was having problems with erections. The resident was already writing a prescription to help with this problem when I asked what had been going on in his life around the time his problems began. He said his mother had died a month before his performance went down. Immediately, the topic of conversation turned to grief and the experience of resulting depression (which had not been addressed by the resident). After a brief conversation to normalize his reactions, the gentleman left with not only a recommendation for grief counseling, but also a better understanding of the origin of his sexual problems.

To complicate the picture of depression further, most antidepressants have a negative impact on sexual performance for men. However, if the signs of depression in men are recognized earlier, it's likely that the use of antidepressants

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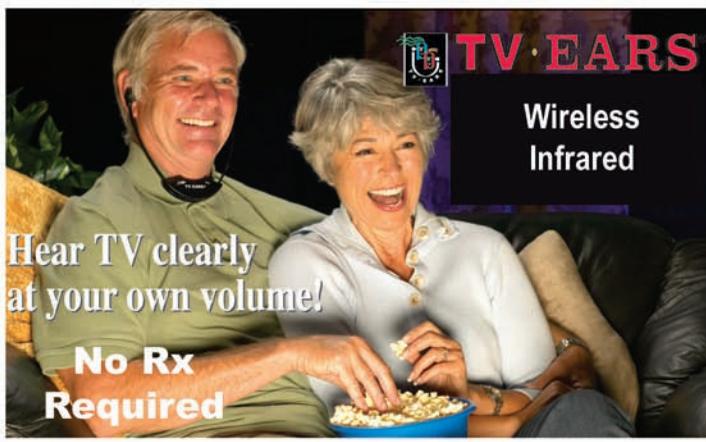
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could be avoided overall.

A final factor contributing to depression in men is something called Male Menopause. Approximately 40% of men in their 40's, 50's and 60's experience a stage of life-type depression. Once laughed at, men do appear to go through a mid-life crisis, but one that is no joke. This is the time when men stereotypically have affairs, buy a sports car, and change their image overall. This critical point in life can result in unnecessary divorces, misattributed stressors, and overall chaotic life disturbance if depression is not appropriately recognized. As mentioned before, when depressed, a man tends to attempt to improve his sense of control. However, during a stage of life depression, he may make decisions that are based more on his experience of the depression than an actual need to change his life.

Why So Different In Men?

Despite coming from the same planet, depression does appear to have a different impact on males vs. females. Although there are exceptions to the rule, it appears as if an experience of depression stems from firmly ingrained cultural expectations. Men are still expected to be "the strong ones", are supposed to be successful at all cost, and should restrain their emotions overall. They are taught to

be in control, with any expression of emotional distress being seen as taboo. This often means that men would rather suffer in silence than seek the help that might actually help alleviate their concerns. On the other hand, males themselves may not attribute their symptoms to depression since they can vary so much from the typical depressive profile.

However, given that statistics indicate that 75-80% of all suicides are by men, recognition of depression in males is imperative. Although more women attempt suicide, men are more likely to complete it. Therefore, whether self-diagnosed or in seeking help, both men and women should consider the varied responses to emotion. Estimates show that it can take up to ten years and three health professionals to properly diagnose depression. Despite these stats, increased awareness and education regarding the differences between males and females will help to clear up the challenging problem of depression in men. This will make the dots happier, too.

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Signs of Depression in Males



- Feel others are to blame
- Feel angry, irritable, and hostile
- Feel suspicious and guarded
- Create conflicts
- Attack when feeling hurt
- Become immersed in work (avoiding thinking or feeling)
- Restless and agitated
- Sleep too little
- Feel ashamed for who they are
- Frustrated if not praised enough
- Cannot openly admit weakness
- Strong sense of failure
- Find ways to create control; become compulsive
- Use of alcohol, TV, sports, and sex to self medicate
- Believe their problems could be solved only if their (spouse, co-worker, friend) would treat them better

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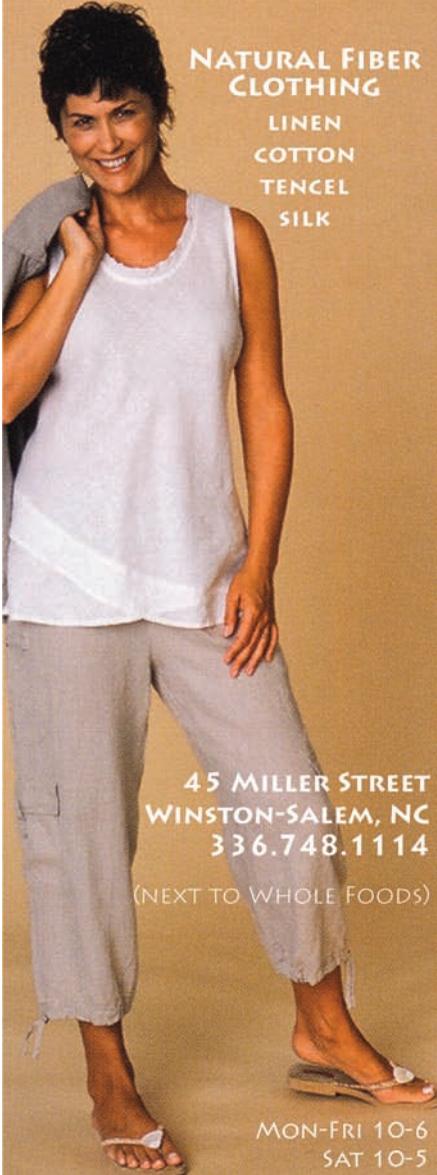
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