



Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

## Myths and facts about mental health and gender



Does our gender make us more vulnerable to particular mental health challenges? In a word, yes. While the World Health Organization states that overall, the rate of psychiatric disorders are almost identical for men and women, there are significant differences in what kinds of mental illness men and women are likely to experience – as well as many myths about those differences, including:

- **Men are less emotional.** Research has shown that there are no differences in how men and women emotionally respond to situations. However, men have been less likely to exhibit emotion because of social conditioning.
- **Only women suffer from Postpartum Depression.** Recent research shows that new fathers are also at risk for depression.
- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) only affects military personnel.** PTSD can affect anyone who has experienced a traumatic event (including sexual, emotional or physical abuse).
- **Eating Disorders only affect women.** Twenty-five to 40 percent of people with eating disorders are males.

Despite these and other myths surrounding the role gender plays in mental illness, women do seem to be more likely to experience depression and anxiety, while men seem to be at greater risk for substance abuse and antisocial disorders. The reasons why are as complex as human beings themselves – an intricate mix of biological, psychological and societal factors.

### A delicate balance

There are many biological factors involved in mental illness, including individual brain structure and chemistry, chronic medical conditions, exposure to toxins, drugs or alcohol while in the womb, brain injuries, genetics – and our hormones.

While women have been the focus of the hormone-mental health debate for years with much being written about the role of estrogen and premenstrual syndrome (PMS), pregnancy, postpartum depression and menopause – science is at last paying attention to the effect of testosterone on men’s mental health.

Research now shows that high testosterone levels in men are linked to extremely competitive, risk-taking and even aggressive behaviour while low testosterone has been shown to cause mood swings, increased stress, and depression.

Our biology is only part of the picture; however Negative life events, poverty and stress are also factors in the most common mental health illness -- depression, anxiety. The society and culture in which we live – and the expectations placed on men and women, play huge roles in our mental health.

### **It's not easy being male ...**

Men and boys have been expected to be tough, brave and not show any emotion except for anger or happiness. Talking about feelings, crying or asking for help were simply not considered manly. As a result, self-care and stress management have been seen as signs of weakness by many men.

These often rigid gender expectations actually leave men vulnerable to ignoring or not understanding their mental health. As a result it is scary to note that among Canadians of all ages, four of every five suicides are male; in the UK, men are around three times more likely to kill themselves than women and in, Australia, suicide has overtaken car accidents as the leading cause of death in males since 1991.

### **... or female**

The most common mental disorders – depression and anxiety – disproportionately affect women. However, the World Health Organization states that “gender-based violence, socioeconomic disadvantage, low income and income inequality, low or subordinate social status and unremitting responsibility for the care of others” play a role in impairing women’s coping skills and self-esteem.

Women also confront, more so than men, media images that portray an often completely unattainable standard of the ideal female body. Body image is closely linked to self-esteem and the vast majority of women in Canada, the US and the UK report being unhappy with their bodies.

### **Make mental health a priority**

Men and women may experience - mental health challenges differently but they have one thing in common: mental illness can seriously affect every aspect of their lives. We all need to recognize the risks, recognize the symptoms and, most importantly, make mental health our priority.

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