

Manxiety: how to know whether you need therapy



For many men, admitting they have a problem and asking for support is an alien concept Justin Paget / Corbis

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For men who believe suffering in silence is a sign of masculinity not martyrdom, therapy can literally be a lifesaver

Men feel they should be able to solve any issue, alone. Just as they typically refuse to see a doctor despite lumps growing or bits falling off them, they can also be reluctant to reach out when having psychological difficulties. Unlike women, they don't see it as natural or normal to discuss their problems with friends. For many, admitting they have a problem and asking for support is an alien concept. Frequently, they only find themselves on the couch because their partner has issued an ultimatum, or worse, left, and they've stumbled to my practice in a state of shock.

Therapy requires the honesty and courage to reveal your darkest feelings, flaws and

fears. This is so hard for men, who are often raised to believe that suffering in silence, never admitting to pain or sadness, is a sign of masculinity not martyrdom. But therapy can literally be a life-saver. More British men are warming to therapy, though, especially the younger generation. Therapy is a safe environment, and for men, not being emotionally responsible for the other person is a huge relief. These are some of the common reasons men seek help.

Depression

Depression is not about feeling sad or blue, it's an altogether different, more sinister beast: if you find no joy in work, leisure or life, are constantly tired and depleted, listless, blank of initiative, uninterested in sex beyond satisfying a need, dread waking up and facing the day — then, yes, something is wrong with you. And yet men say, “I suppose everybody goes through this. Perhaps it'll pass.”

Meanwhile, men often help it pass by drinking to oblivion (or some other unhelpful habit that sidesteps emotion). This combination of emotional illiteracy and self-containment sucks oxygen from his relationship — the partner is shut out, mentally and probably physically. So hostility flares, intimacy diminishes; he feels worse, retreats more. Seeking therapy is essential — this is a mental emergency.

Anxiety

So often, men apologise: “I'm sure you see people who have got far bigger problems than me.” This, when the foundations of their life are collapsing, their mental health hanging by a thread. We often regard men as having all the power, but frequently they feel impotent and helpless . . . but don't dare tell. Only when the situation is critical — their family life, or indeed their life, is at stake — do they seek help.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is often seen as effective for anxiety or mild depression, and can be attractive to men because treatment is solution-focused and finite: it allows you to deconstruct the anxiety and rationalise it. It can certainly benefit men who are anxious about a specific issue, eg, a job interview, although the core problem will need to be addressed in greater depth. Anxiety usually stems from low confidence, and is often expressed in behaviours like bullying or shouting, like a gorilla beating his chest on sight of a rival male; a show of aggression to mask internal fear and worry.

Anxiety you can deal with — say, the roof is leaking, but I'll fix it, feel better — is normal. If your leaking roof is symbolic of your life spinning out of control, a trip to the therapist is in order. Therapy is a form of surrogate parenting, and teaches us how to better parent ourselves. That gives us real power, alleviating anxiety by helping us to gain control.

Status insecurity and job dissatisfaction

These days, it's normal to find yourself on a treadmill of push, push, push, money, money, money, more, more, more. Normal, but unhealthy. Even if your secret desire is to spend more time with your family, you can rarely afford that luxury. Society makes it hard for men to stay true to their values, to prioritise what's important. You might know your career is not who you are, but it's offensively apparent you're judged on

what you do. If you feel cold dread as you step into the office, however; if the pressure and politics are affecting your health, change is required. An outsider's view is helpful: you can be so spiritually crushed by work, you lose perspective.

Fear of commitment

Not all of us are raised in a *Happy Days*-style home, and may view marriage and relationships with suspicion or caution. Even if we yearn for a family and permanent partner, often our subconscious has other ideas. Hence, the man who is forever relationship-hopping and wonders if it's bad luck, or a pathological aversion to fairytales. If friends marry and divorce, this compounds his fear; he keeps looking for his soul mate, but at heart, doesn't believe she exists.

Peer pressure rarely helps: as with a group of alcoholics, if one stops drinking, the rest will move heaven and earth to get him back in the pub. A man's single friends will resist his withdrawal from the pack, to avoid confronting their own choices. Typical male advice, when there are marriage problems, is to "get out". If you address your problems, it highlights his. So if you are receiving facile relationship advice, consider the source. We are herd animals; we want to belong. It's less a question of therapy here, than needing to grow up.

Yet also examine your family history and the beliefs you've absorbed about long-term relationships, as this can create issues that require professional detangling. If your father was less than ideal, in character or behaviour, it can be hard for a man to feel good about himself as a male. If his mother was at fault, it may be hard for him to trust a woman. It's possible that we live in a throwaway society, with so much on offer, that men have a narcissistic fantasy of the perfect woman — and pack it in when confronted with a delightfully flawed human being. Perhaps the serial boyfriend has found a way of keeping his distance, though, of protecting himself. If we experienced emotional pain as a child, we fear risking that again, or revisiting it. We lack belief in our own ability to be resilient, overcome conflict — often, our instinct is to do what we couldn't when we were little: run away.

If this strikes a chord, therapy will be of benefit — even if the relationship ends, you did all you could to make it work. Also, you'll learn to communicate effectively and to distinguish the potential of the present from the difficulties of the past. If you fear commitment, you possibly need guidance in the nitty-gritty of the long-term relationship — negotiation, compromise and understanding. Therapists are interpreters; listening is a crucial skill to acquire.

The porn issue

Most men usually feel guilty about their porn habit if their partner finds out, but it's natural for most men to masturbate daily. We could call it stress relief. Porn is a lure because sex for men is performance-related — yet with the screen, nothing is expected. When both partners are tired and busy, porn can fill a biological need (if not an emotional one). It becomes a problem when he can't perform without it, when it interferes with his intimate relationship, or indeed, appears to replace it.

If he suspects that his porn and masturbation habit is getting out of control, a man

could ask himself whether he feels uncomfortable about the frequency of his habit, his fantasies, his props or where he indulges? Does the tendency encroach on other areas of his life? Is he constantly seeking greater thrills, more explicit material, to achieve the same levels of relief? If so, his compulsion has acquired an addictive quality, and therapy could help modify his behaviour.

This is important, as, if we add shame to the mix (whether inspired by self-loathing or his partner's disgust), the situation becomes toxic. Blame causes guilt and emotional hurt, which he might drown in alcohol, blot out with drugs or gaming. Or he'll simply feel overwhelmed. Seeking help is a matter of urgency.

In all this, we forget to be kind to ourselves. Maintaining a fulfilling relationship requires care, energy — and emotional intelligence. If you can't connect with your own feelings, it's unlikely you will successfully connect with others. As Aristotle said, educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all. Whereas self-awareness and emotional honesty will enable intimacy to thrive.

Excessive drinking

If you use alcohol to escape your reality, it's a problem, but we pretend that social or binge drinking doesn't count. Alcohol is a useful tool for men who feel blank desperation and don't know how else to make it go away: they've lost touch with their authentic self and what would bring contentment. So we hide behind the concept of "relaxing".

However, if you need more than one drink every evening to relax, which becomes a bottle, several pints . . . there's a dependency. To an extent, drinking is a socially acceptable way of ignoring our pain. If we replace the word "relax" with "escape", we can see there's a problem we need to solve. It's easy to form the habit — at university, under pressure at work — but it soon becomes an artificial way of alleviating anxiety. After all, it isn't yoga.

Eventually, it exacerbates our internal pain, turmoil, distress, until we feel dead inside. Yet no one deserves to feel isolated and desperate; there is strength in facing your problems. If you can't break the habit alone, therapy will help. To learn emotional maturity will empower you and enable you to recognise your real needs, rather than the artificial ones that your situation and society may have imposed on you.

Problems with intimacy

Intimacy for men means deliberately making yourself vulnerable, and as hunter-gatherers, every fibre of our being rebels. It doesn't help that the constant message from society is that as males we should, essentially, shut up and cope, rather than talk and communicate. True intimacy does not mean an instinctive, intuitive ability to anticipate your partner's every need — any relationship would buckle under such weighty expectation — but if you do have intimacy issues, the clues may vary, but are glaring: relationships inevitably falter, your marriage is sexless, your children don't speak to you, every family conversation ends a row or sulk.

Many of my clients are intellectually brilliant — bankers, lawyers, chief executives —

but their emotional age and ability is stunted. Often, this stems from childhood: some mothers do not challenge their boys; no emotional maturity is demanded; it's rare that a mother says: "How do you think I feel when you behave like this?" If you haven't learnt to connect as a child, it's difficult to master that skill as an adult. If you cannot connect with others, though, it's likely that you are emotionally disconnected from yourself: any negative emotion is frantically deadened (with drink or other destructive behaviour), because you don't know how to address it in a healthy, helpful way.

Infidelity

A common question: he's had a one-night stand, feels so ashamed — should he tell her? Or, he's confessed, feels emotionally mature and honest, and shocked that his girlfriend is threatening to end the relationship. Consider this: did he want to ease his conscience, or was this kiss-and-tell for her sake? Emotional maturity in this sorry situation is to say nothing and live with the guilt. Confessing will only hurt her; it is not a selfless act. But we are all fallible; even the most perfect relationship is not immune. The best therapy here is to avoid future temptation, focus wholeheartedly on your relationship.

Twice is not an error. It's a new habit. Either there's a problem in the relationship that would bear analysis, or your issues with intimacy require scrutiny. If you have a fulfilling love life with your partner, straying is unusual — but what constitutes great sex? It's probably easier to identify bad sex: it's devoid of care, or the wish to give satisfaction, and seems more like an elaborate form of masturbation. If this sounds wincingly familiar, you and your partner need to talk about what lies beneath (anger, resentment, frustrations; common causes of emotional and physical withdrawal).

Yet it's quality, not quantity, that counts: fabulous sex every three weeks is preferable to flinching martyrdom every other night. It is so hard to discuss dissatisfaction with sex, but it requires an ability to comprehend your own state of mind and discuss it, with emotional honesty, in a non-hurtful way. This underpins relationship happiness, as much as the sex itself. For this reason, a therapist, interpreter and diplomat, may keep peace talks on track.

Jealousy

Jealousy is caused by lack of trust, but if your partner has never betrayed you, then it's a state of mind worth investigating. Jealousy is rooted in insecurity — perhaps a parent, or previous partner, was unfaithful. Even if you were bullied at school, it can cause jealousy; that fear of being mocked and made a fool of haunting you from childhood. Jealousy is a way to exert control, when you fear you are powerless. It is different to objecting to genuinely disrespectful behaviour, or teasing your beloved for her devotion to *Sherlock* — if you compulsively check your partner's phone, interrogate her if she talks to someone, this verges on abuse and must be addressed. If not, it will destroy the relationship. She will leave, or become passive and cowed. Jealousy is not an acceptable feature of a loving relationship.

Jean-Claude Chalmet was talking to Anna Maxted
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Therapy stats

Two thirds of those seeking counselling are women

Source: NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies

The number of people seeking counselling has risen over the past year by 10.6 per cent in men and 7.7 per cent in women.

Source: NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies

The number of men seeking counselling is rising more quickly than the number of women.

Source: NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies

80 per cent of people dependent on alcohol are male

Source: Mental Health Foundation

There are 17.7 suicides per 100,000 men; 5.4 per 100,000 women

Source: Office for National Statistics

67 per cent of suicidal young men say they have nowhere to turn for emotional help

Source: Samaritans