

"NOT FOR MEN ONLY"

By Frank Pittman, M.D.

MEN MAY BE AS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION AS WOMEN. THEY JUST DON'T RECOGNIZE IT AS READILY

More women are thought to suffer from depression than men. I don't believe it: men are four to five times more likely to commit suicide, far more likely to get themselves killed accidentally, and notoriously more likely to do other self-destructive things.

Women are more likely to feel depression, to tell others about it, to seek therapy for it -and to recover. Men, on the other hand, tend to be out of touch with feelings of hopelessness and emptiness and therefore cannot put their feelings into words. Instead, they seem to communicate their despair by behaving in ways that make life intolerable for themselves and for women they love. If they do eventually find the words with which to cry out for help, no one may be listening.

Men are raised to deny feelings and to take action instead; to try to act tough and manly, no matter what the circumstances. Take the story of Wayne, a well-known former athlete. He had tried many businesses, none of them very successful. After his restaurant closed and he lost his house, he began to drink, stay out all night, and get into fights in bars. He had a terrible automobile accident and almost lost his leg and afterward he lived on the disability insurance. He finally quit drinking but soon left his wife and moved in with another woman. However, she couldn't tolerate his temper tantrums and shot at him. Fortunately, she missed.

I heard about Wayne when his first wife, Faye, called me from a hospital emergency room to tell me that Wayne had just cut his throat, had been narrowly saved from bleeding to death, and had been told by the emergency room doctor that he needed a psychiatrist.

When I suggested the possibility that all the craziness of the past couple of years might be due to depression, Wayne and Faye were both baffled. Wayne insisted he didn't feel depressed and even

made jokes about being able to grin ear to ear now that his throat was cut.

Depression is not just sadness. It is a chemical condition in the brain that makes it difficult for people to envision that their lives or anything they do will turn out well. Depression can occur because of chronic pain or daily alcohol use, because you've inherited a tendency toward it. But for men, the most likely cause of depression is your failure to be the man you think you should be, a situation that leaves you beating up on yourself and distrusting the love and other goodies you get, so your brain chemistry always registers more pain than pleasure.

Certain activities and feelings can trigger the brain chemicals that can repair a depression: sex, joy, and triumph. But the healing will only happen if the exercise is free of anger, the sex free of guilt, the joy free of danger, and the triumph free of shame. Bear in mind however, that triumph is not possible unless you set achievable goals and realistic expectations for yourself.

Alcohol is especially dangerous for depression : It's a burial chemical assault on the brain that may offer brief relief from pain but can ultimately deepen it to the point of suicide.

Some depressed people, often women, cry for help and reach out to someone who can ease the pain and offer hope. They amplify their cries for help until someone hears them. But other depressed people, mostly men, feel defeated if they acknowledge emotional pain or a need for someone else, so they try to mask their feelings by faking well-being and by desperately increasing the intensity of their activities.

Depressed people like Wayne may need therapy to get out of the emotional hole they're in. If depression is bad enough they may need anti-depressant drugs; which work. But the crucial first step is to tell somebody you're still alive. The ability to cry out can get us the help we need; the ability to grin and bear it is cutting our own throats.

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