

Men, Doctors, & Shrinks
by Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

Men may be getting braver. This is not based on men's affinity for extreme sports, mixed martial arts, or bear wrestling. We're talking about something requiring far more guts—going to the doctor. Today's men are visiting physicians more often, according to Larry S. Fields, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians. So we're evolving. But women are still four times more likely to consult a doctor than are men.

So what makes men shy away from doctors? Perhaps we don't like to have sensitive parts of our bodies poked or prodded. But women have the larger claim, in this area, hands down, and they still go to doctors. Fields says men drag their feet because we deny that we're at risk. We believe we're fine until proven otherwise.

Men's brains are hard-wired toward independence, taking risks, and enduring pain. We hear about the man who cut off his own arm to save his life and we admire the stoicism required. We share stories about the guy who amputates his finger but finishes plowing before going to the ER. Being healthy, strong, and tough as nails is the masculine ideal. While we don't like being sick, we downright hate being weak or frail.

Nevertheless, according to Fields, there's good reason for men to man-up and get themselves to doctors. Bottom line is doctor consults help us be stronger longer. And scheduling that physical is better for your son's health. Boys often model Dad's behavior. If dad utilizes doctors, his son will likely believe that's what real men do.

But if you think it's hard for men to see a physician, try getting most men to see a "shrink". It's easier to give a cat a bath. Why? It's not just our independence. Counseling requires letting someone else into one's private emotional world—a place we may try not to think much about ourselves. Besides, we're fixers. So why would we seek anyone else's help when we have perfectly good heads on our own shoulders? We're fine.

But the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) begs to differ. By their estimates, six million men in America suffer depression every year and 6% of men struggle with anxiety. Many are frequently angry, irritable or sullen. For many depressed or anxious men, alcohol or drugs become the treatment of choice. But ignoring emotional problems is like ignoring your car's low oil level. Depressed men are more likely to have cardiovascular problems within five years. Their sexual performance and enjoyment is often diminished. Their productivity and pay at work is frequently affected. Relationships become strained. Virtually everyone close to them suffers along with them. And men are four times more likely to suicide than are women.

Does seeing a counselor help? Robust research shows 80% of those treated with psychotherapy are significantly better off than those who don't receive treatment. In fact, outcomes are on par with bypass surgery or treatment for arthritis.

So if you know a man who's struggling with anxiety or depression, it may be worth it to try getting the cat and bath together, because "When Mom ain't happy, ain't nobody happy," also applies to Dad. And going to the doctor yields better outcomes for everyone in a man's world.