



Men's Health, Both Physical and Mental: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review explores the inner workings of international men's health, both mental and physical. With increasing public interest surrounding the ever-climbing numbers of male suicide, this literature review seeks to shed light on the mental torment many men go through in our modern world, not only affecting them mentally, but also, at times, physically. While dealing with internal and external pressures to be hypermasculine, as well as the lasting effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic, many men face alcoholism and anabolic steroid and other drug abuse in efforts to cope with depression and anxiety, as the stigma surrounding men's mental health lives on. While there are ongoing efforts to destigmatize men speaking out, up to this point the "toxic" stereotypes and expectations of masculinity have persisted in the lives of so many men across the world.

Key words

Masculinities; Health; Mental health; Suicide; Stigma

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Introduction

Throughout this essay I will delve deeper into the issues surrounding men's health through the lens of different literature I have read. Some of the topics I wish to cover include men's physical health and issues surrounding binge drinking and the use of steroids along with subsequent pain and symptom denial. Later on in this paper I will discuss men's mental health, and the recent increased rates in male suicide. As I will show, men's mental health is a topic of growing concern, with November being coined 'Men's Mental Health Month', in which many people across the world participate in 'Movember' as a charity incentive to raise money for men's mental health charities and to encourage men to speak out about their struggles with mental health. Lastly, I will discuss the effects of Covid-19 on men's health and the potential negative impacts it has had on men across the globe. It is no secret that many men engage in activity-based friendships, so what happens when the world shuts down and all of these activities are cancelled indefinitely? Did male friendships suffer in the wake of The Pandemic? What does "toxic masculinity" look like in real-world scenarios and how does it directly affect men and boys that we know, not just within statistics?

Men's physical health: substance abuse

Firstly, I want to discuss the topic of men's physical health, specifically in relation to casual alcohol and drug abuse. Studies show that men "constitute the majority of drug abusers and are far greater consumers of alcohol than women" and that the concept of "risk taking" is far more of an issue for men than it is for women. These risks include "smoking, alcohol, drug taking, unsafe sexual practices and road accidents" (Sabo, D. 2005). It is almost a tradition in our modern capitalist world to "drink alcohol to overcome stress" (Sabo, D. 2005). For a large amount of men in this world "expectations surrounding masculinity encourage heavy drinking" (Sabo, D. 2005). There is the idea that a real man is someone who can handle their alcohol, leading to binge drinking issues. There is an equation "between manhood and alcohol consumption" (Sabo, D. 2005). Men are twice as likely to have liver diseases than women and are more likely to drive while under the influence (Kahn, Jack S. 2009.) There is also a prevalent rise in the use of anabolic steroids in young men to build muscle and improve athletic ability particularly in the world of bodybuilding. The use and overuse of such steroids can have knock on effects that lead to further "drug use, alcohol use, aggression, suicidal ideation/ behaviour and pathogenic weight-loss behaviour" (Sabo, D. 2005). The reasons for using anabolic steroids lie in toxicity, in a very similar way to the overconsumption of alcohol, "where masculinity is equated to muscle and where the psychosocial drive to be big and powerful is prominent" (Sabo, D. 2005). Oftentimes, users of such

steroids “put their personal health at risk in pursuit of ideal masculinity” (Sabo, D. 2005).

These two issues of alcohol use and anabolic steroid use are just two cases of toxic forms of hypermasculinity occurring in young people across the globe. There is a universal pressure on all men, but on young men and boys in particular, to look and act a certain way among peers that can directly cause them harm. Alongside these two issues is the subsequent issue of pain and symptom denial. As a blanket statement that can be proven false in some instances but rings true in so many others: “boys are taught not to express their pain, to be tough and deny pain” (Sabo, D. 2005). This is yet another display of masculinity that is favoured the world over. In our society “men often deny pain, suppress the emotional aspects of pain, and take an action orientated approach to coping with pain” (Sabo, D. 2005) in order to appear as they feel they are expected to appear; tough. The physical side of men’s health has huge amounts of toxicity that lie beneath the surface and are very clearly visible to those who study masculinity.

Men’s mental health: Bullying and suicide

Secondly, I would like to continue on this route of masculinity regarding men’s health but I will be writing on the topics of mental health, bullying and suicide. It is no doubt that the topic of mental health among men has become something of a monster in recent years. The month of November has been dedicated as men’s mental health month across the world and is partly the reason I chose this essay topic. In our society, as mentioned earlier, men are taught to hide their pain and suffering, not only in terms of physical pain, but also mental. “The ideals of masculinity not only interfere with the expression of distress and related help seeking. They are in many ways present in a man’s life and are deeply intertwined with the process of development of depression and recovery from it” (Valkonen, J. & Hänninen, V. 2013). There is little to no room in a man’s life for pain, and if it is there, he must hide it in order to appear more masculine. It is clear that there is an expectation on men to hide their true emotions if those emotions will weaken their masculinity to their community, “men who fail to live up to the expectations placed on their gender may be more prone to mental health problems such as substance abuse, depression, anxiety and social fears” (Royster, M.O., Richmond, A., Eng, E. & Margolis, L. 2006). As well as this, the use of steroids, as mentioned above, can lead to serious eating and body disorders. “Non-disclosure of distress emerged as a key issue in examining pathways to suicidal action for a group of men” (Cleary, A. 2005).

The silence surrounding men’s mental health is lessening as the years go on but male suicide rates are scarily high. According to the Central Statistics Office, “Among young males, aged under 25 years, suicide was

the number one cause of death in 2019” and between 2018 and 2019 “male suicides rose by 4.6%” (CSO, 2022). The effects of the Covid 19 Pandemic on men’s mental health and friendships is undoubtedly one of great sadness. As a result of a study done to measure the levels of psychological distress among men in Brazil during the pandemic, it has been concluded that “stress and intolerance to uncertainty are important factors in understanding mental suffering among men” (de Sousa et al., 2021). Throughout the pandemic “disclosure of difficulties was viewed as un-masculine, as implying weakness” (Cleary, A. 2005). This silence that is encouraged by the world is so damaging to men and young boys growing up in this environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the pressure that men face every single day to be hypermasculine is unbelievably pervasive. The extent that some men go to in order to appear more masculine, and in turn risk their own physical and mental health, is unfathomable. From a bodybuilder feeling the need to be so inhumanly muscular that they would take steroids and risk damaging their bodies, to that feeling of ‘needing to be perfect’ taking over and leading to a very real mental illness. Men’s health is no joke and whether it is physical or mental, the pressure to be ultra-masculine needs to be addressed as it appears to be the main cause of harm for men in today’s society. There are other topics that I didn’t have space to reach in this essay, such as Prostate cancer, erectile disorders and HIV/AIDS, which are aspects of men’s health that also come with stigma, assumptions and, for some, decreased feelings of claims to masculinity and failure to meet masculine lifestyles and expectations. Overall the expectation on men across the world to “be a man” can very seriously damage their physical and mental health and lead to long term illness and, sometimes, death. Men’s health is suffering due to the pervasive nature of toxic stereotypes and hypermasculinity in every corner of the world.

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