

TALKING ABOUT MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH





‘Joe! My buddy Joe! Hey! Wanna play fetch?’ barked Patch, as they scampered over to greet their colleague. Farmer Joe always had a scratch for Patch’s ears. And sometimes he had treats. He was just so fun to be around and ...



‘Joe?’ Patch put their head to one side, wondering why Joe looked so grumpy. After all, it was the Farm summer party. He usually loved that. **‘Hey, pal, are you okay?’** If their mate needed to talk, Patch was ready to listen.



‘I’m fine. Go away,’ snapped Joe. He left the party – usually the highlight of their year – and went to drink alone in the shed.



Patch understood that wanting some space doesn't always mean someone is experiencing mental health challenges. But Patch also knew that when a person withdraws from activities they usually enjoy, it can be a sign they aren't feeling great.



Many of the signs that someone needs to talk apply regardless of gender. But the tendency to avoid talking about mental health is pronounced for many men. That's why it's crucial to know what to look out for.



Patch ran through the things that can suggest someone needs to talk about their mental health.

ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCE USE

Drinking to excess, particularly when alone, can be a sign that someone needs to talk about their mental health. People of all genders sometimes use alcohol and substances in response to mental health challenges. But drinking heavily is also part of traditional masculine identities, so men experiencing mental health challenges may resort to this to mask their true feelings.



OVERWORKING

Research suggests that men consider their jobs to be the main cause of challenges to their mental health. And being perceived as a successful breadwinner is part of a traditional masculine identity. This can lead some men to push themselves even harder than usual at work when they're not feeling great.



WITHDRAWING

It can be hard to enjoy things you usually love when facing mental health challenges. The pressure that many men feel to live up to societal expectations about masculinity can make them even more likely to withdraw when they need to talk.



ANGER AND IRRITABILITY

Mental health challenges can cause people to be snappy and grumpy, even if they're normally quite the opposite. This can impact anyone. But harmful gender stereotypes often normalise men being verbally grumpy as just 'blokey' behaviour. This can sometimes prevent people from asking men if they need to talk.



CHANGES IN APPEARANCE

If someone's approach to personal grooming suddenly changes, it may be a sign they aren't feeling themselves. The same may apply if they look exhausted, have bloodshot eyes, or exhibit sudden weight gain or loss.



CHANGES TO CONCENTRATION LEVELS

Because men may experience barriers to talking about their mental health, they might be more likely to seek distraction instead. This can lead to spending excessive time on their phone or other devices and to overworking.



ACHES, PAINS, AND ABSENCES

Mental illness can cause physical symptoms, such as muscle pain, fatigue, and headaches. Some men may find it easier to focus on the physical symptoms they're experiencing, instead of talking about how they feel. Short absences and lateness can also suggest someone's trying to manage their symptoms away from others.





Patch realised their buddy Joe had been displaying several of these behaviours. But hadn't Joe told them he was fine? Why would he say that if he wasn't? Things like societal pressure to appear 'strong' and the stigma that's wrongly attached to mental health challenges can make it hard for men to open up.



Luckily, Patch asked Joe again the next day if he was okay. This time, Joe didn't ignore Patch. Instead, he wearily scratched the dog's ears. **'Not really, mate,'** sighed Joe. He looked tired and worried.



Patch thought it'd help Joe to open up if they took a walk. They knew it was important to talk 1 on 1, somewhere neutral. When Patch and Joe took walks together, they looked forwards; Patch knew this reduced eye contact would make it easier for Joe to talk.



Patch was also mindful about the language they used. They knew that Joe felt pressure to appear strong and unemotional. Patch avoided words like 'struggle' and 'sadness.' Instead, they reframed seeking support as a positive step that can build strength and resilience.



Patch talked to Joe about their own experiences with mental health. They told Joe about a time when they found it hard to open up. Joe really appreciated this. It helped him understand that finding it hard to talk is nothing to be ashamed of. It also gave him confidence that he too could share his experiences.



Patch knew that sometimes men find engaging with mental health resources challenging. Maybe that's why only 36% of NHS referrals for talking therapies are made for blokes, thought Patch, as they reached the end of their walk.



Luckily, Patch knew that research suggests men find it easier to open up when there's a practical or creative element to the support. They suggested Joe look into resources like the Men's Sheds Association. They combine talking with activities, which could help Joe relax and share his experiences.



1 in 4 of us will experience mental health challenges in our lifetime. Follow Patch's example and make sure the men you work with know they don't have to face mental health challenges alone.