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Men under pressure

Ciarán Brennan

We all suffer from stress but for men, the pressure to be macho can often be a contributory factor

THE TRAFFIC has been atrocious, you're late getting the children to school, you've missed your morning meeting and you're behind with the key project. That probably sounds familiar to a lot of people. Modern life is stressful, and men seem to have become increasingly vulnerable to stress and other mental health problems.

A survey carried out in the UK two years ago by vitamin supplement company Wellman found that British men are suffering high rates of stress and depression due to overwork.

And men seem to be finding it more difficult to cope with that stress. Research from Finland in 2002 suggested that stressful events have a bigger impact on men's health than women's, and that women may be stronger and better equipped to handle stress than men.

"It's quite difficult to say whether stress affects men or women more," says Peter Baker, chief executive of the Men's Health Forum in Britain. "It's hard to quantify that and I'm not sure if it is particularly helpful to say that one sex is worse off than the other. What we do know is that large numbers of men suffer from stress, but what is particularly important with men is that they are not very good at dealing with it."

There is a perception that if a man admits he's stressed, it is a sign of weakness, says life coach Therese Ryan, founder of Renewal Consultants, which specialises in stress management.

"Isn't it the essence of maleness to push the limits, to tough it out or, as the saying goes, 'take it like a man'?" she asks, adding that this results in an assumption that real men don't go to the doctor, real men don't need a break and real men don't get stressed.

Baker agrees that men are under pressure not to concede that they may suffer from stress.

"That runs very deep for a lot of men, this idea that we have to live up to a pretty unrealistic idea of what being a man is all about," he says.

"We won't admit to stress, we won't own up to it and I think that is particularly true of work. A man is not going to rush off to his doctor saying 'I'm feeling stressed', and he's certainly not going to tell his boss.

"I think the idea is, you get your head down and you work long hours and hope you can get through it."

Throw in the changing nature of workplace, with the job for life becoming a thing of the past as work becomes less secure, more intense and more complex due to technological changes, and a pattern begins to emerge of unrelenting pressure.

"I think there is a lot more expected of men - they are expected to be involved parents, to be invested more in the relationships they have with their partners - and these are not necessarily bad things, but to try to get them in balance and do them well can be very stressful for a lot of people," explains Baker.

"Relationships are more fragile as well, and that can be an additional stressor for men."

That stress is leading to mental and physical health problems for men.

"What research and professional experience in working with men who have burnt out has proven is that those who suffer from stress are more accident-prone, take less care of their diet, either over- or under-exercise and resort to negative social behaviour, smoking and alcohol as their way to relax," says Ryan.

This only ensures that the damage to the health of these sufferers is compounded, she says.

"What men also do in terms of trying to cope with stress is drink," agrees Baker. "It is one of the ways that men medicate themselves for mental health problems. They don't go to the doctor - but they do go to the pub."

But the health risks of that approach are huge. Stress-related illnesses range from depression, hair loss, ulcers, burn-out, cardiovascular diseases, strokes, heart attacks and diabetes.

Doctors are prescribing medication as a short-term option to alleviate the signs and symptoms of stress, but this only alleviates the symptoms, and it definitely does not resolve the situation, says Ryan.

"Stress management is a life skill. Let's not over medicalise it," she says.

While learning to manage stress cannot be treated with a "one size fits all" approach, Ryan says that there are changes men can make to their lives.

"If you are looking after your body, the chances are the body is going to be able to sustain those challenges you are putting it under," says Ryan.

Exercise, healthy eating, cutting out stimulants such as coffee and adequate hydration are the first steps, she says.

Baker believes men should be "more bold in challenging employers who are placing more unrealistic expectations on their staff". He also advocates the setting up of a dedicated confidential helpline or e-mail service for men because they are more likely to seek help that way than walking into a doctor's surgery.

"Longer term, we need to bring up boys to ask for help and admit they can't cope all the time," he says.

Stress: signs and symptoms

What are the signs and symptoms of stress which men present with?

Irritability.

Constant need to stay busy.

Short fuse, snappy.

Less inclined to chat; withdrawn into himself.

Increase in alcohol intake.

Sleeplessness.

Fatigue.

Loss of interest in going to the gym.

Little joy - loss of interest in doing things.

Increase in appetite - junk, sugary, salt foods.

Headaches.

Decreased immunity - ear and throat infections.

Heart burn.

Reduced work performance.

Erectile dysfunction.

Source: Therese Ryan, Renewal Consultants

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