

Letting Go of Our “Guyses” and Embracing Vulnerability: Masculinity and Mental Health

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I often wondered why more women access mental health services compared to men. We know that men experience mental illness, and we also know that more men suicide than women. After reflecting on my own struggles as a man in the mental health system, I began to think about this question.

I believe that pop-culture and the media shape our values and give meaning to the words we use. Often, there are words that we adopt without much thought. For example, professional sports and the entertainment business tell us that to be masculine, a man must be “strong” “stoic” and in “control.” Furthermore, mental health carries a connotation that reflects “weakness” “irrationality” or “being out of control.” I would argue that these are stereotypes, which foster misunderstanding; the heart of stigma.

As a man who experienced mental illness, asking for help was a challenge. I had the belief that as a man, I had to portray a “strong” and “tough” exterior. This manly exterior was described by sociologist and author Jackson Katz as a “tough guyse.” This “guyse”, a play on the word ‘guise’, refers to the bullet-proof disguise men are influenced to adopt. My experience with mental illness clashed with the manly attributes I believed I had to wear. The clashing of my “tough guyse,” against the need to seek out mental health support, left me feeling weak, useless and unmanly. My “tough guyse” was not only detracting from my mental health, it made asking for help much harder.

My healing began when I became able to break down and unlearn what society had informed me about mental illness and masculinity. Getting my “manhood guyse” out of the way was pivotal in my health recovery. My social work training assisted me with this insight. The influence of my manhood was something I had to openly discuss with my therapist. My breakthrough came when I embraced vulnerability and gave myself permission to cry. It was a small protest against the masculine stereotypes that had confined and repressed my emotion.

I have had the privilege of working with men in the mental health system. Through this work, I have had the opportunity to sit with men and witness them courageously let go of their “tough guise.” These acts of valour continue to inspire my own mental health recovery work. I am hopeful that as we men courageously embrace vulnerability and share our stories, new meaning will be formed around masculinity and mental illness.

This article was written by Scott Grant, a front line mental health worker and person with lived experience. The “Open Mind” column is sponsored by community partners who are committed to raising awareness about mental health, reducing stigma and providing information about resources that can help. Contact ahееley@cmhawwd.ca . For local mental health resources / information, visit www.communitytorchlight.com or call 1-844-HERE247.

