

Men's mental health – four top tips

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Insight from Sanna Atherton, Corporate Nutritionist, [SuperWellness](#)

Men's mental health is a cause for concern. Even pre-pandemic there was a grave disparity in the high number of men who die from suicide; 4 in every 5 suicides are by men, yet mental illness diagnoses are lower than for women. It is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50. In fact, men aged 40 to 49 have the highest suicide rates in the UK and there has been an increase across all ages since the pandemic. Three times the average suicide rates are from the construction industry.

70% of employees say they have experienced poor mental health because of work. Good mental health is not just the absence of mental illness. It influences how we think, feel and act. This then underpins our ability to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in.

A low number of men seek treatment for depression, anxiety and other mental health challenges and men are at a higher possibility than women to use potentially harmful coping methods such as drugs or alcohol. They are three times more likely to use and become dependent on these.

What we eat and drink affects the health and function of our brains. Nutrition is an important tool to use to approach not only our physical health but also our mental health.

1. Nutrition

Your diet has a significant impact on all aspects of your health, particularly your metabolic health, testosterone levels and mental health. It's best to start with removing foods that are unhealthy for you as it's much harder to fix the damage caused by these by incorporating more healthy foods.

Then start to add in beneficial foods. A 2017 study found that a Mediterranean-style pattern led to a

significant reduction in both depression and anxiety symptoms. In just 12 weeks 32% of those who were depressed had complete remission, meaning they no longer had depression. This is a dramatic result, and no drug has ever come close to this.

Aim for a Mediterranean-style diet, which includes lots of fruit and vegetables, nuts and seeds, lean proteins, fish, good fats from olive oil and some dairy whilst limiting processed foods. It's important to get enough protein, so aim for 1.2-2g of protein /kg of body weight. This is important not only for muscle mass, but protein is needed to produce a range of hormones and neurotransmitters as well as affecting your immune system and digestion.

- Connection

The biggest indicator of long-term health and well-being is the strength of your relationships with family, friends and partners. Part of this is that it boosts serotonin.

Serotonin is often called the happy hormone as it increases the likelihood of certain circuits activating in the brain which generally give us a feeling of well-being and contentment.

As our lives have become busier, it's common to see her connections and friendships drop off, as well as us not engaging in as many activities.

Making new friends as an adult can feel strange, but this doesn't mean it's not possible. Women and men tend to interact and bond differently. Men bond more over doing activities together, whereas women normally chat more and discuss more about their lives.

You can therefore utilise this by participating in more activities to foster connections. It can be difficult to find the time for activities that involve going somewhere, connecting virtually can often be useful. Online gaming or virtual groups on social media is a good place to start.

Get chatting to neighbours or just people you see regularly can be a great way of creating new friendships. Joining a club can help you beat loneliness, plus it's way easier to chat when you're doing something you love. Chances are there are people out there who share the same hobbies. From football to art, get together, do what you love and feel better for it. Reach out and reconnect with old friends. If you've fallen out of touch with a friend who made you feel good, there's no harm in reconnecting.

- Prioritise Sleep

Good sleep is a foundation for good physical and mental health and should be a priority if you aren't sleeping well.

Remove things that are known to dramatically decrease the quality of your sleep.

This includes alcohol, caffeine and a high consumption of food late in the evening.

Get direct sunlight in the morning because the sunlight triggers your circadian clock, indicating it's the beginning of the day, this then sets off an internal timer which helps you feel tired and sleep well at night.

Reduce exposure to artificial light in the evening, particularly from screens. This is because they contain what's called blue light, and this wavelength of light is a strong indicator of it being daytime and makes it

harder for your body to fall asleep. If limiting this exposure is challenging or unrealistic then you can purchase these blue light-blocking glasses which filter out this wavelength.

Try tracking your sleep as it can be hard to objectively monitor your sleep and getting some real feedback can prove highly motivational in changing your habits and trying to improve your sleep.

Download Your Brain if you are constantly thinking or ruminating about things whilst trying to get to sleep, journaling or writing down your plans for the next day can help settle these thoughts and has been shown to improve sleep quality.

- Be Active

Research found exercise to be 1.5 times more effective for mental health than anti-depressant medication or counselling, with benefits seen in just 12 weeks.

The World Health Organisation, WHO, recommends the following strategy:

- a. As a foundation, aim for 8000-10000 steps a day and find ways to increase your movement such as taking the stairs or going for quick mid-day walks.
- On the lower range of recommendation, build to 5 hours per week of moderate-intensity exercise or 1-3 hours per week of vigorous exercise. Moderate-intensity exercise is when your heart rate is slightly elevated and your rate of breathing increases.

Examples may include,

- brisk walking,
- dancing,
- steady swimming, and
- playing tennis.

Vigorous exercise is when you have a fast heart rate and your breathing is also rapid – holding any form of conversation isn't possible. This includes high-intensity Interval training (also referred to as HIIT), sprinting, or spin classes.

- At the higher end of the WHO recommendations, aim for over 5 hours of moderate exercise a week or over 3 hours of vigorous exercise.

In addition, it's recommended to include strength training sessions as muscle mass plays an important role in your health.

- The final step is to include a greater array of training and recovery strategies such as sauna, cold plunges, yoga, and stretching. Committing to a group activity or hobby around exercise is a great way to regularly go as it provides some accountability.

In addition to this, if you hit the WHO's recommended activity levels, research found there was a 25% reduction in developing mental health issues. and it's estimated that 11.5% of all depression cases could have been prevented. A little still goes a long way as even if you only complete half of the recommended activity, you can see an 18% reduction in risk for mental health. Don't worry about needing to go all in,

small and steady increases in activity are enough to see improvements.

As An Overall Rule

If you feel you are somewhat struggling or not feeling your best, then it's best to schedule a session with your GP. Sometimes the hardest thing is just making the first step, so booking a session with your GP can help keep you accountable to actually speak with someone. It will give you a chance to share how you're doing and will allow professional feedback.

They can then provide you with additional resources or maybe refer you to a therapist or psychiatrist.

The sooner you speak with someone the better, as we know that as mental health tends to deteriorate, it's often harder for that person to seek help.

For more information about SuperWellness and to book a bespoke wellbeing session for your organisation, please visit www.superwellness.co.uk or email info@superwellness.co.uk.