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Op-Ed Men Locked Down

By SERGE SARDO

When the first lockdown was imposed in March, as a provider of mental health support services we braced ourselves for a rise in demand. Indeed we were soon seeing almost double our usual clientele, people facing stress and anxiety over the upheaval in their lives and uncertainty over their future.

What we didn't expect, however, was a significant 154% increase in men seeking support between January and July, including a 29% jump in men seeking relationship counselling and a 26% rise in men seeking individual counselling.

With the lockdown sending most of Australia's workforce home, many couples found that having to work and play in the same space with their partner every single day completely changed the dynamics of their relationship and for many, tested the very foundations that their relationship was built on.

Some couples adapted and drew on the depth and strength of the relationship. Anecdotally, we know that the isolation has served to strengthen family bonds as they are compelled to spend more time together. For many families however, being isolated for long periods has exposed often neglected, unresolved tensions easily camouflaged by the busyness of our normal life.

Men, are generally experts at camouflaging and avoiding relationship issues. So, we were pleasantly surprised to see an increase in men initiating counselling support to address the tensions exposed during this isolation.

For many men, this pandemic has removed what is perhaps men's greatest distraction from addressing challenges in their relationship, going to work. Spending 24/7 with a partner in often confined, intense environments places enormous pressure on relationships. Our data shows that more men are now keen to understand how they can play a role in improving their relationship.

Men are interested in the concept of mindfulness, helping them to manage personal stress and being open to exploring what isn't working in their relationship and taking responsibility for their actions.

But while this group of men is making positive changes to their lives during the lockdown, another is desperately trying to hold it together. Many of our male clients whose jobs have been impacted are now battling severe anxiety and depression.

Many of us draw a large part of our self-worth and identity from our job and as such, losing a job can drastically impact feelings of self-worth often resulting in depression and anxiety. Our data shows that there is a feeling of being adrift, without purpose in life.

The statistics on men are sobering even during ordinary times. One in eight men in Australia will experience depression and one in five will experience anxiety in their lifetime.¹ Only 28% of them will seek professional help.²

Recent research has also found that many Australians are putting on a brave face but are deeply worried in private.³ There is ample research to demonstrate that for many men, their notion of masculinity and strength means showing vulnerability and asking for help is a sign of weakness.



We've placed much emphasis in recent years on dismissing some of these stereotypes about men and women. The rise we've seen in men accessing counselling for their relationships could be a sign that men's beliefs about seeking help are shifting. And that is worth shouting from the hilltops.

We are still in this together and none of us have to go it alone.

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