

Putting the “men” into mental health

When "men's health awareness month" is talked about, the mind almost always goes to medical screenings first.

June is a time to encourage men to take care of their health and prioritize going in to be seen by a medical professional.

"Men are notoriously difficult to get in for regular checkups, unless there's a problem. Men tend to ignore problems, a lot of time until it's too late or they develop a problem, when they could have avoided it," says Brian Curtis, MD, vice president, chief medical officer of OSF Medical Group.

Dr. Curtis says men need to start regular primary care checkups for blood pressure, cholesterol and weight screenings in their early 20s. At 45, men need to start screening for colon cancer (colonoscopy), along with prostate cancer screening in their 50s.

While these are all important things to do, Dr. Curtis says it's also important for men to prioritize their mental well-being.

In terms of mental health, there are two major issues guys run into.

1: Men tend to not open up and talk about their feelings.

2: Guys aren't the best at checking in with their buddies about how they're doing.

"It's OK not to be OK"

"Fine is not always fine," Dr. Curtis points out. While guys might say they're "OK," it's important to ask better, open-ended questions to get a better view of how they're really doing.

"The markers to look out for are behavior changes. Maybe they're not acting like they normally would," Dr. Curtis says. "So, you can check in and say 'hey, I noticed you seem a little down. Or you usually come out for softball, and you're not doing that lately. I want to see how you're doing.'"

When it comes to mental health, Dr. Curtis says men don't always make sleep a priority.

"Most people should be getting six to eight hours of sleep a night," he says.

Regular exercise is also a big help for people's mental health.

"You don't have to be a marathon runner. You can just go outside for a walk," Dr. Curtis adds.

Dr. Curtis says eating ultra-processed foods, which are very "calorie dense" (meaning a lot of calories with a small amount of food), causes your head to take at least 30 minutes to catch up with your stomach. Breaking things down into portions, finishing the meal and then giving your body time to process the food allows you to eat better portion sizes.

Alcohol is another major concern which can impact many aspects of people's lives.

"Alcohol is actually a depressant. So one, people who consume alcohol, it further depresses you. And two, it interferes with your sleep pattern," Dr. Curtis says. "It affects your ability to go into good REM (rapid eye movement) sleep."

Talk about it

Whether it's your primary care physician, counselor, family member or close friend, it's important to talk to a person you trust about what's going on in your life.

Dr. Curtis has seen some improvement over the last few years in men being more vocal about their mental health challenges. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, he says it's become even more apparent that community and socialization are so important for people's overall well-being.

If you need professional help, OSF HealthCare's [Behavioral & Mental Health services](#) can connect you with providers and resources. Services can be provided in an outpatient setting, in the hospital, or online.

The national suicide hotline is available 24/7. Just dial 9-8-8, choose the option that's best for you, and speak with a skilled counselor about what's going on.