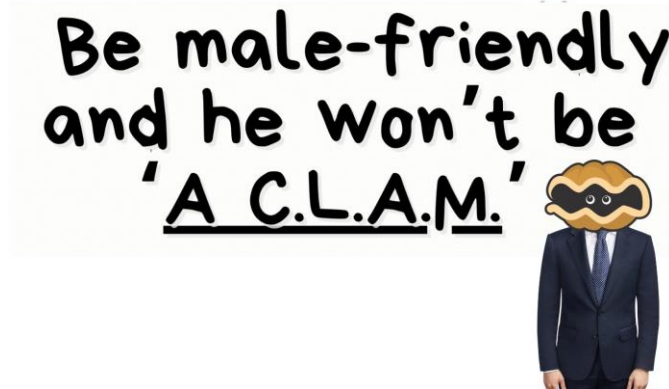


“Men won't CLAM up if you're male-friendly!” A brief guide to supporting men's mental health.



By John Barry, Martin Seager, and Louise Liddon

You notice that your dad is acting strangely. He's remote and tense. You know something is bothering him but you don't know how to talk to him about it. What do you do?

One of the guys at work is making mistakes, turning up late and taking days off. He's not normally like this. What's wrong with him?

You run a helpline for mental health issues. You find the men phone up once, don't talk for long, hang up without saying very much and never call back. How might you improve these conversations?

Last year the [BPS published guidance on therapy for men](#), authored by Martin Seager and I. This has had a moderately good reception, but probably hasn't reached some of the places it is needed, such as people dealing with family members, people working in informal men's support groups, and volunteers working on helplines. So this new guidance should be a useful summary of the guidance for professional therapists, and a good starting point for everyone else.

The BACP recently also come up with some [advice](#) on identifying depression in men. Some of the advice is quite good, for example, highlighting that anger can be a symptom of depression in men. However some of the advice was somewhat stuck in the victim-blaming of recent decades e.g. the opening paragraph blames stereotypes for men not talking about their problems, blames "adherence to traditional masculine roles" for emotionally stoic isolation, and blames "traditional gender norms" for men bottling up anger. So although it's good that they flag up that male depression can be expressed differently to female depression, it is a pity that masculinity is being seen as a barrier rather than something potentially useful.

Against the backdrop of this thinking, the Centre for Male Psychology has come up with 'bite size' guidance of five points to think about in relation to men's mental health. This is in three parts. The first part is the article you are reading now, which gives some background to the guidance. The second part is the five points, summarised in a paragraph each, on one side of A4. The third part is an infographic which illustrates the five points in an even briefer form.

The intention is that people working with men, or who might have a male relative with problems, can print off the materials, or look at them on their phone as a quick guides as to how that might handle the situation.

"...if we approach men in a male-friendly way – which is essentially with empathy and understanding - they are less likely to clam up, and might even give you a pearl of wisdom."

Who is it for?

This guidance is written without jargon in order to be understood by the average person, but what is described is relevant to people who help men professionally, such as helpline workers and therapists. There are some parts that are more for the lay person, for example, the suggestion of walking and talking in the park won't work so readily for people who work in a standard clinic, but on the other hand therapists can very usefully take on many of the

suggestions e.g. the advice regarding patriarchy theory. People should use their common sense or professional guidelines, when using this guidance. For example, a man might be angry because he is traumatised, but you shouldn't put yourself unreasonably in danger in trying to help him. Also, psychologists shouldn't breach any of their professional codes e.g. if a client wants to talk about something highly sensitive in a public place like a busy café, consideration should be given regarding confidentiality and boundaries. In other words, people should use their best judgement given the situation.

Outline of the materials

One of the key points is recognising that men who are depressed, traumatised or distressed don't always look sad or deflated, they may appear to be withdrawn or hostile, and may be taking substances more than usual. It's like the tale of the lion with the thorn in it's paw – almost everyone is afraid to approach someone who looks angry. But with some courage, and within the boundaries of our own personal safety, it's possible for us to see beyond the anger and do something to help.

Another important point relates to helping men in a way they are likely to respond to. Too often we 'do unto others as we would like to be done to' without realising this might not suit all others. In regards to men's mental health, people often think that getting them to talk about their feelings is the key, and although there is some truth to that, sometimes we are trying to unlock the front door when the side door is wide open. The other points are about recognising the kinds of life events that are most likely to impact men but may be overlooked; the benefits of action-orientation and activities; and avoiding negative ideas about men, such as toxic [masculinity](#) or patriarchy theory, which at best might be considered [luxury beliefs](#), and at worst might [backfire](#).

'He's not A CLAM!'

We didn't start out with the intention of having an acronym, but when the idea was suggested the word 'CLAM' stood out, and putting the 'A' before it fitted nicely. Apart from 'CLAM' identifying the five key words of our message, it suggested the phrase "to clam up" i.e. refuse to talk. This is something that men are often accused of – unjustly I believe – and

reminded me of what [Dr Joe McDonagh said](#) in the 2021 Male Psychology Conference: “Don’t just try to get men to open up – they are not a can of beans”. We are not entitled to know another person’s thoughts and feelings, so we can’t just demand that men talk to us about their feelings, especially when people may not be equipped to respond to what might be said. Some men have experienced sharing their feelings but find it backfires on them, for example, the 41% of men who said they [regretted opening up](#), usually because the person they spoke to didn’t seem to respect them or understand their problem.

Based on research and clinical evidence (for example [Martin Seager’s Man Talk workshop](#) for helpline workers) it seems likely that if we approach men in a male-friendly way – which is essentially with empathy and understanding – they are less likely to clam up, and might even give you a pearl of wisdom. It should be born in mind this is a work in progress, and we value feedback from others (please leave comments below the article) and very much welcome good quality male-friendly research on this topic. If you want any further information on this topic, or training in understanding male psychology, you can find our [textbook here](#) and [online course here](#).

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Be male-friendly, and men won't clam up.

You can use 'A CLAM' to remember five pointers to help a man who may be in difficulty

Anger. *Anger or irritability can be a sign of stress.* Men and women are equal but not identical. Some research finds that men and women in general express stress differently. Men may express depression or trauma not by crying or looking sad, but by being irritable or angry, spending too long on addictive internet activities, or drinking too much or abusing other substances.

Comfortable. *Find out what is comfortable for him.* The standard therapy room consists of two chairs facing each other. This might sound comfortable, but many men prefer a “shoulder to shoulder” situation with less emphasis on eye contact (see ‘Activities’, below). A therapy clinic can work well if the therapist themselves is genuinely male-friendly, but some men might feel better talking while doing an activity, such as walking in a park or forest.

Life events. *What's going on in his life?* Men die by suicide three times more often than women do. This can be related to life events or problems, such as relationship breakdown, legal or financial stress, work problems, or living alone. Or there may be things you don't know about, such as having difficulty seeing his children after divorce or separation, or being a victim of domestic violence, or traumatic issues from his childhood. He might not show it, but these might be impacting him more than anyone realises.

Activities. *Try 'doing', not just talking.* Men are urged to talk about their feelings, but when they do we might not like what we hear. A man might want to talk, but not know who he can trust, feel they won't be understood, or be unable to take time out of work to talk to someone. Men might prefer to 'fix the problem' than talk about their feelings e.g. talk to a lawyer if his worries are caused by a legal issue. Rather than blaming men for not talking about their feelings, it might help to direct a man to a more male-friendly action-orientated activity, such as playing sport with friends, joining a *Men's Shed*, or a men's support group (see examples [here](#)). Men can be very supportive and empathic to each other in groups and during activities, especially if told it is ok to talk about issues with each other.

Myth. *See the man, not the myth.* Encouraging men to talk, but then interpreting what they say through the filter of an agenda, such as the idea that [masculinity](#) or patriarchy are to blame for their problems, might not help to understand the man's problem, and could even make him feel worse.

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Be male-friendly and he won't be "A C.L.A.M."

If you sense something is wrong, the following might help.



Anger can be a sign of distress

He might look annoyed rather than sad, and might want to drink, or spend longer on addictive internet activities than usual, rather than talk.

What is comfortable for him?

Don't insist he fits into your way of dealing with things. If he wants to walk and talk in the park not a therapy clinic, then try that.



What's going on in his life?

He might not show it, but he might feel serious pressure if he has problems with things like relationships, work or money problems, or legal issues.

Try activities as well as talking

Talking to a therapist can be great, but if he would rather not, then try other things such as playing football, or join a 'Men's Shed'.



See the man, not the myth

Blaming his problems on masculinity or patriarchy might misunderstand his situation, and he might end up feeling worse.