Playing the blues

Experts say middle-aged men are suffering a depression epidemic and the symptoms can be very surprising, writes Polly Dunbar

When Michael Foley found himself waking up at four o'clock every morning and feeling down throughout the day, he told himself he was just stressed.

The 40-year-old bank manager was under huge pressure at work as well as going through a custody battle with his former wife. Given time, he thought, the feelings would just pass, so instead of confiding in his new wife Joanne, 40, a nurse, he simply tried to carry on with things as normal.

“I didn’t tell anybody how down I was and that I had it going on, because Joanne, he says, “I didn’t want to burden Joanne, especially because it involved my ex-wife.”

“It didn’t occur to me to seek treatment – I was too denial and I wouldn’t have thought a doctor could have helped anyway. I just tried to hold it together at work and at home until, eventually, I snapped.”

In fact, Michael was suffering from depression so severely that one evening when Joanne was out, he took an overdose of painkillers.

Luckily she found him in time and after being taken to casualty, he was made a full recovery and was only then that he conceded he needed help.

Figures released by the Office of National Statistics in Britain last month show that since the start of 2007, the suicide rate among men aged between 45 and 99 has increased by 8.5 percent.

Overall suicides hit 6,041 in 2011, with deaths among men accounting for 5820 of them -- the highest level for a generation.

Depression is the biggest killer of men aged over 45. In the Western world, affecting one in four in Britain and draining £11 billion (R145 billion) from the economy every year. Although the illness affects twice as many women as men, females are more likely to seek treatment.

Men, in contrast, carry on in silence, which means their condition often remains undiagnosed – tragically, in many cases, until it’s too late. As a result, mental health experts are calling male depression a hidden epidemic and asking women to look out for signs in their husbands and partners.

The number of young men with mental health problems has always been high – 20 percent of those aged between 36 and 24 suffer – but now the condition is affecting a rising number of middle-aged men.

Middle-aged

“It’s worrying that the group most at risk now is middle-aged men because they’re not usually perceived to be a problem,” says Marjorie Wallace, founder of the mental health charity Sane.

For wives and partners, living with a man in this condition can be profoundly distressing, particularly when they have to discuss the issue with a stonewalled. Caroline Carr, a clinical hypnotherapist, went through the experience during her husband’s depression a decade ago.

She has since written a book and founded a website – mypartnerisdepressed.com – to help others in the same position.

“It’s extremely difficult to be the partner of a depressed man. My husband Jim worked in television, and his depression was triggered by a period in which he wasn’t getting much work,” she says.

“It was a shock for me, and I felt desperately worried. I didn’t know what to expect, or what to do for the best. I’ve been told by many other women they feel the same.

“It’s common for men to pour their energy into functioning normally elsewhere in their lives, particularly at work. At home, they become withdrawn and distant.”

“They often want to take themselves away for a time because they feel they can deal with their problems better alone. They can also lash out, revealing the tremendous anger they feel towards themselves and the world by saying terrible things.”

“My husband would often snap at me for no reason and I sometimes felt he blamed me for his miseries. He could also feel that his problems were much worse than mine.”

“The first step in coping with a partner’s depression is understanding the possible reasons. It is often assumed that because middle-aged men are in their prime and settled in their family lives and careers, they should be content. But experts say the recession has had a massive impact on men’s sense of stability and, as a result, their mental health.”

Joe Ferris, the Samaritans’ director of policy, research and development, says: “Men often feel pressure to live up to an ideal of masculinity measured by career success, and if anything jeopardises that – for example, being made redundant – it can be disastrous to their confidence as there are fewer opportunities to start again. Just the fear of losing a job can be enough to trigger depression.”

But stress caused by the economic climate is not the only reason for soaring levels of depression in this age group. Men in their 40s and 50s are facing unique social pressures, too.

“This group are a ‘buffer generation’ who fall between their older fathers with their stiff-upper-lip attitudes, and their younger, more emotionally articulate sons,” says Ferris. “They’re expected to provide for their families in the traditional way, but also be sensitive and self-aware, and they often feel they’re not particularly good at either.”

“Beyond the age of 30, men tend to have fewer supportive peer relationships than women, so they rely on their partners for emotional support. But they often assume women need strong, masculine partners. They think if they’re struggling, that constitutes weakness, so they try to cope alone.”

“During Michael Foley’s severe depression, his unwillfulness to talk about his feelings pushed his relationship with his wife to the brink. She says: “He masked his feelings by laughing and joking, and when I caught him crying he just said he missed his two children by his ex-wife, because he wasn’t seeing them that often. I tried to get him to open up, but he wouldn’t.”

“Instead of letting things come up for discussion, he would sidestep discussions and not talk about how he felt”. He felt his family and friends were ‘unsupported’, and his family and friends felt he was ‘unsupported’.

“Depressed men will often sleep or eat more or less than normal,” says Ferris. “If you say the wrong thing, don’t panic. Show you understand, which you can do by asking follow-up questions and repeating key things they’ve said.”

It is important to try not to let your own feelings get in the way at this stage. “I tried hard to ask a lot of questions so I understood what Matthew was going through,” says Alness. “I once understood more, I realised his depression was nothing to do with me and our relationship.”

Sometimes, men find it easier to talk to someone who is not emotionally involved, so sometimes it’s less confrontational than sitting face-to-face with somebody. “Don’t forget to ask how they feel, because men will sometimes stick to the facts of what’s going on rather than expressing emotions.”

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