



HELEN'S STORY



WARNING: this story mentions the topic of suicide

Telling men to 'man up' - or other such unhelpful phrases - simply does not work, as the statistics on male suicide can testify. Helen gives a female and a bereaved wife's perspective on men's mental health; arguing passionately for a change in our collective approach to the issue.

'Boys don't cry! Man up! Crying like a bitch! Shut up you pussy! You'll start having periods next! What's up you fucking wimp! Pussy! Stop being a girl! What you moaning at!'

Just some of the many put-down phrases used every single day, man to man and, yes, father to son. A boy or man who cries isn't a man! A boy or man who asks for help isn't a man! Let's just take a look at how well this approach to being a man is going so far: 500,000 male suicides each year, one in 10 dads suffer Postnatal Depression (PND) and anxiety, 50% of dads have depression from looking after a partner with PND. Yes, we want our boys to grow up strong. Yes, we want our men to hold us up when we are falling, but I am pretty damn sure that we also want our men alive and well?

If we keep responding to our baby boys, every time they cry or get scared, with "oh stop it, stop being a girl and man up!" they will quickly learn that there is no point in coming to us for help. We are left with boys who evolve into emotionally stunted men. Every time a new stressor comes into play, it burns inside of them along with a lifetime's worth of bad experiences. Often alcohol lets it all come flooding out in sometimes very ugly and uncontrollable outbursts. This can then become a coping tactic. Drugs could be on the horizon too as the boy who was told to 'man up' is now a man with no idea how to talk about how he is feeling or how to reach out. Adult life is hard, being a parent is hard, so why are we taking away essential coping mechanisms?

Teaching boys and men to show emotions doesn't mean they will be sobbing into tissues, arranging the flowers and cushions whilst lighting scented candles. Teaching them to share their feelings when they are hurt or scared won't remove their masculinity or testosterone. In fact, if we inhibit our boys

and men from expressing their fears and pains, we are actually putting them at risk of changing their genetic makeup (genotype). By not allowing boys and men to talk openly, they will regularly be in stressful situations which, in turn, can trigger the fight or flight response that releases cortisol. Repeated and/or prolonged release of cortisol can make it less reactive, leaving the person less able to cope with the stressors.

To start making a difference to the next generation, it takes a simple hug and listening ear, that's all. If you are a health professional looking after a woman who has miscarried, please remember so has the dad. If the mum is struggling with mental health during pregnancy, the dad will be having a hard time too. If the mum has just delivered a stillborn baby, the dad will be devastated too. If the mum just had a traumatic delivery, the dad just had to stand helplessly and watch!

When you are down the pub, club, football, rugby club - wherever - and the mate who is always holding a wad of cash, always laughing, taking the piss, Mr Life and Soul, starts saying things just a little out of character or getting angry at things that he wouldn't normally, don't brush it off. You could save a life by asking, "Are you okay?". But you have to mean it and listen to the reply.

Why do I care so much? Because four years ago I lost my partner, my children lost their daddy and a wider group of friends and family lost yet another man to suicide. So, let's be the listening ear or the warm hug and break this horrendous cycle.

If you have been affected by this story, you can call the Samaritans 24-hour helpline on 116 123, email jo@samaritans.org or visit www.samaritans.org



TOP TIPS:

- **Let people help you: let them make you some food, even if you don't eat it; let someone help do the washing up or put on the laundry. Use the charities that are there to help, they want to help and there is NO shame. Let someone be with you, you don't need to talk just let them be and sit; just so that you're not alone. Don't be afraid of starting to cry - you will be able to stop again - or what you might say. There is no right or wrong here, go with it, accept the help and don't expect too much. There are no time limits.**
- **Don't let hindsight eat you up, you could never have known. Know you did the best you could at the time.**