Supporting Male Student Mental Health in Higher Education

Zoe Maggs

student minds

Acknowledgements

This guide was written by **Zoe Maggs**, Programme Officer for Men's Mental Health at Student Minds.

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Context

Well Lads was a three-year project on men's mental health in higher education run by Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity, and supported by funding from Comic Relief between 2018 and 2021. The project's main aims were to encourage male students to look for help with their mental health when they need it, and to improve male students' understanding of mental health. The project took a co-production approach, where male student volunteers worked together to decide what different activities they could run at their universities. Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the volunteers chose to work remotely, focussing on podcasting and social media. Student Minds provided training and support to enable the volunteers to make informed choices about the shape their work would take.

This guide has been made from the volunteers' training and the learnings they have taken from running their own podcast on men's mental health: Changing MENtality.

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity

Our goal is to transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive. We support students to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support their peers and create change. We also work collaboratively with institutions, students' unions and other organisations involved in higher education, supporting them to take a whole–university approach to mental health. In addition to providing well–resourced mental health services, a whole–university approach recognises that all aspects of university life should support and promote positive mental health and well-being.

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Why male student mental health?

With over 48% of young people in the UK entering higher education, and 75% of all mental health difficulties developing by the time people are in their mid-20s, universities can play a key role in encouraging students to engage with their mental health during what is a crucial period of their life (EPI, 2018).

Between 2007-2017, there was a five-fold increase in the number of students telling their universities that they are experiencing a mental health difficulty (IPPR, 2017). This trend has continued since. There are many reasons why this may be happening, including an increase in health education and literacy, and more acceptance of mental health, allowing people to feel they can access support. Reports from women have been increasing at twice the rate of reports from men; in 2012, women were 1.6 times more likely to declare a mental health condition than men, but by 2020 they were 2.2 times more likely (UK, 2018).

As UCAS' 2020 report on student mental health clarifies, this gender gap in mental health disclosures does not mean men are less likely to need support. Research by the Mental Health Foundation (2020) has found that men with mental health conditions are more likely to be under-diagnosed and less likely to access support but also more likely to reach crisis point. Male student have been telling Student Minds that they find it difficult to open up about their mental health due to a lack of knowledge and feelings of isolation or due to the impact of gender stereotypes.

"I wish I had known that it wasn't unusual to experience depression as a young male"

"Speaking about mental health makes you less of a man"

The impact of these barriers can be huge for individual students, the wider student population and their families. Tragically, suicide rates are high amongst young males in all parts of the United Kingdom (Mind, 2020). This suicide rate, alongside the sheer number of young men experiencing challenges related to their experience of being a student, makes it essential for us to provide a project targeted to male students.

Ten tips for supporting male mental health in higher education

1. Work with men to understand what will help

2. Frame help-seeking within positive 'masculine' traits like strength and responsibility

3. Highlight a diverse range of male role models

4. Promote mental health initiatives through a range of pre-existing social networks

5. Consider creating male-only support spaces unrelated to sports

6. Use activities as a 'hook' to engage men in mental health initiatives

7. Relate mental health to physical health

8. Use humour and non-clinical language

9. Signpost services delivered via a variety of different modes, and highlight confidentiality

10. Recognise that 'male privilege' doesn't preclude disadvantage/inequality

1. Work with men to understand what will help

The phrase **"nothing about us without us is for us"** has been embedded in our project as a succinct way of describing the co-production approach. When trying to find solutions to complex inequalities, it is crucial that those affected by the issues are respected as voices central to achieving meaningful change. At the same time, it is important to recognise that what works for some men will not be preferred by all. The sheer diversity of opinions and stories we have heard from the men on the Well Lads project demonstrate that while there may be some general trends in terms of what may be helpful in encouraging men to engage with their mental health, there is no one-size-fits all approach that will work. It is fundamental that you work with the men studying at your university to understand their varying needs and to design services, health promotion and activities around this.

"Being 'a man' is not a concrete or universal categorisation and there are many differences and different groups that exist within this definition when we talk about mental health." (Well Lads Volunteer)

For more information on best practice when co-producing with students, see our Co-producing with students guide, and our Well Lads co-production case study.

2. Frame help-seeking within positive 'masculine' traits like strength and responsibility

Traditional masculine values such as self-reliance and stoicism have been found to play a role in men not wanting to ask for help with their mental health (Mind, 2020), (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al, 2020). During co-production meetings held with volunteers on the Well Lads project, we explored what the concept of masculinity represents to them. Volunteers offered a range of opinions, many of which seemed to be at odds with showing vulnerability and asking for help:

"Competitive as opposed to cooperative"

"Strong, but only when it's manly to do so"

"Can't ever be wrong"

They also noted how masculinity is a social construct, something that has been normalised by society over a long period of time, can be 'toxic', and is something that **"needs to change".** Some explicitly highlighted how masculine values can create barriers to getting help, saying they are **"constraining"** and **"equivalent to chains".**

We have seen that male students may be more likely to engage in mental health support when it is framed to fit within 'masculinity', rather than being at odds with it. There are many positive traditional masculine traits that can be drawn on when encouraging men to engage with mental health initiatives. Some of those mentioned by the volunteers on the project include responsibility, strength, brotherhood and being a role model. Creating messaging and content that speaks to these traits may help to normalise help-seeking for male students.

For example, when recruiting for volunteers to join the project as peer support facilitators, our social media data analytics demonstrated that the use of phrases such as 'manbassadors' and 'champions' were more appealing to men than 'peer supporter' or posts that explicitly mentioned getting support for mental health.

Want to be a leader in conversations on Men's Mental Health?

Apply to become a Men's Mental Health podcaster

student minds

Too often men don't feel able to reach out for help when they need it. Be part of the change!

Apply to join our Men's Mental Health Committee

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When recruiting for these roles, we also found that men responded better to images where men are facing away from them. In the example given above, some volunteers have commented that an image like this enables them to feel that the position is for any kind of man, because the person featured is walking among a crowd, and there is nothing identifiable about him that could cause the prospective applicants to judge themselves as being more or less appropriate to apply.

3. Highlight a diverse range of male role models

Highlighting male role models seeking support for their mental health can help to encourage men at your university to reach out (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al, 2020). This can be particularly effective when well-known celebrities can be brought on-board. However it is important that role models are reflective of the communities they represent. The student community is very diverse, in terms of social backgrounds, demographics and ages, and therefore it is important to ensure you feature a diverse range of role models so that as many men as possible can 'see' themselves in the models.

"As a person of colour and a man, it's hard to reach out for help when you know that most of the people who are employed in support and counselling roles are white women. I just don't feel like I'm going to be understood. They're not going to know how it feels to be a mixed-race man. I know it's going to take a long time for the healthcare system itself to become more diverse, but in the meantime, even just seeing men like me asking for help, and getting it without judgement or being pointed out as different would help massively." (Well Lads Volunteer)

Diversity was very important to the men on the Well Lads project, who put a lot of time and effort into designing their logo to appear inclusive to a range of men, especially in relation to ethnicity and age. The student population is often assumed to consist of just young people only, but, in the 2019/20, 37% of undergraduates were classed as 'mature' (aged 21 or over at the point of application) (Hubble and Bolton, 2021) . The volunteers used a range of skin-tones and included different hair colours including grey to include mature students, and when an episode covers topics relating to the LGBTQ+ community, they use a rainbow overlay to signify this to listeners.

Changing MENtality

4. Promote mental health initiatives through a range of pre-existing social networks

Whilst self-identity, and seeing a diverse range of male role models seeking help was very important to the volunteers on the Well Lads project, many also emphasised the importance of featuring men who enjoy a diverse range of hobbies, interests and activities. The emphasis on socialising through 'societies' at university, and the structure of these groups being within an overarching students union that can influence their activities, presents ample opportunities for targeting health promotion at men.

Some volunteers reflected that there is the stereotype that 'all men like football', and other 'male' interests, and for those who do not fit this description, or those who enjoy hobbies that are often thought of as being 'feminine' (e.g. sewing or baking), it can be hard to relate to health promotion that plays into stereotypical 'male' interests.

"You often see the big burly blokes from football and rugby talking about getting help now, which is great, but I often think that there aren't many men like me who just aren't 'men's men' shown to be getting help." (Well Lads Volunteer)

"I'm not your typical loud, gym-going alpha male. I like poetry and current affairs and I'm quite introverted. When I see so many campaigns about 'typical' men getting help, it feels a little like the world is telling me 'it's cool for these kinds of men to talk about mental health now', but not you. It's one of the reasons I wanted to be on the podcast – in the hope that other quiet guys like me might feel more seen and validated" (Well Lads Volunteer)

To help men at university engage with their mental health, you can promote mental health initiatives through a range of pre-existing social networks such as university societies, including, but not limiting promotion to, sports.

5. Consider creating male-only support spaces unrelated to sports

When working with the expert panel for the Well Lads project, we have found that men studying at university can feel that there is a lack of male-only spaces where they can openly talk about their mental health. Often, initiatives that hope to improve the mental health and help seeking behaviours of men have been delivered through sports clubs, as these communities are often considered to be male-heavy. Our Mental Health in Sport programme has been a successful way of reaching more male students, for example. However, it is important to recognise that not all men want to or can take part in sports.

Several volunteers on the project hosted a webinar for students unions, where they promoted the idea that students unions could take a strategic and joined-up approach to influencing student-led societies to create men's meet-ups where the subject of the society is 'typically feminine'. They gave examples such as 'bobbins and beards' for increasing men in sewing and related societies, and 'men making stuff' in crafts more generally.

Male-only spaces will not necessarily be preferred or needed by all men. For example, many of the men on the Well Lads project have reflected that they find it easier to talk to women about their mental health. It is important to provide as much choice as possible to encourage men to engage with their mental health.

"It's not really about 'men need this', or 'men will ask for help if you do that'. We're all different, and we all want different things. I personally find it easier to talk to women about my mental health, but I know there are other guys in the team that would find it easier in a room full of men. The main thing is having the choice" (Well Lads Volunteer)

6. Use activities as a 'hook' to engage men in mental health initiatives

Men may be more open to engaging with their mental health if health promotion or conversations on mental health are embedded within an activity. The Well Lads project took this approach, with volunteers co-producing a podcast as their core activity, with conversations on mental health taking place inside this. Anchoring conversations on mental health within an activity can help to take the focus away from the individuals speaking, and provide a common interest for peers to develop a community around. This approach is sometimes referred to as 'mental health by stealth'.

"Podcasting with Student Minds has helped me manage my mental health. Recording episodes helps me to have conversations with other people about how I'm doing and what helps me, in a way that I wouldn't have talked about before. It really helps me to cement what's important in my self-care, and to move from ideas to actually prioritising time in my week to work on myself." (Well Lads Volunteer)

7. Relate mental health to physical health

Across the Changing MENtality podcast, it has been common for men to talk about experiencing physical health problems or symptoms as a precursor to them becoming aware of a mental health difficulty. When running health promotion or literacy campaigns, focussing on the physical symptoms that can be related to having a mental health condition could help more men come forward. For example, highlighting disturbed sleep, appetite changes or headaches as signs of anxiety or depression, rather than the cognitive or emotional elements which may work better with a female audience.

However, when articulating physical symptoms it is important to highlight that people should not use methods or descriptions of physical actions (such as self harm) or numbers (for example number of pints drank). When using visual components in communicating about mental health, it is important not to use dark, 'head clutcher', head-in-hands style images. This is so it is not triggering for people but also as it is important to remember that mental health difficulties look different for everybody and it is not always clear at a first glance if someone is struggling.

8. Use humour and non-clinical language

When designing services or initiatives, avoiding a name and/or language that emphasises mental health, wellbeing or related terms could help to engage male students who do not identify as having a formal mental health diagnosis but may be experiencing distress (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al 2020). The volunteers on the Well Lads project considered how they could create a name for their podcast that would appeal to a range of men, and focus on the nature of this being an initiative led by men, looking at mens' perspectives on mental health, rather than giving the central focus to the mental health element itself. They chose the name 'Changing MENtality' to capture their hopes that the conversations would change some listeners' ways of thinking about their wellbeing. 'Mentality' felt like a less loaded and more holistic alternative to 'mental health' and similar terms which they felt could put some men off listening.

Changing MENtatlity

Similarly, using humour can help to de-medicalise or de-stigmatise seeking help for mental health (Erentzen et al, 2018). The use of humour, 'banter', and funny mental health campaigns have been shown to increase awareness of mental health and promote greater interest in counselling services for men. For example, CALM's campaign to get men talking about mental health re-frames the term 'Manicure', a 'traditionally' female form of self-care, as a 'fully loaded fry up in the morning'. This enables a light-hearted acknowledgement that typically 'male' spaces and practices are good starting points for men to begin opening up with their friends about their mental health. Time to Change have also used humour in their campaign for people to 'ask twice' when a friend says they are fine. In this image, there is a comedic element to how the man in the illustration is still smiling and acting as if everything is 'fine' when he is actually underneath the heavy burden of a rock, apparently with no way out.

9. Signpost to services delivered via a variety of different modes, and highlight confidentiality

Confidentiality has been found to be a key component to whether male students and men in the wider public more generally will seek help. One of the volunteers on the Well Lads project told us

> "I don't want to get a text or email that says 'from the counselling service', cause I've got housemates and I don't want to have to explain or hide it if they notice" (Well Lads Volunteer)

Whilst it is important to think about the branding and naming of services themselves to improve confidentiality, this can also be approached by thinking about how support is provided. Men are more likely to use anonymous services, such as those delivered by phone or asynchronous support by text or email. As Louis, Well Lads podcaster says in one episode:

> "I think sometimes it can be a lot easier to talk to someone over the phone ... there's not that in person expectation or like feeling that you might be judged" (Louis, Setting Stigma Straight)

10. Recognise that 'male privilege' doesn't preclude disadvantage/ inequality

During the lifetime of this project, we have heard men tell us that it feels 'indulgent' for them to talk about their mental health difficulties, because they are men. Some have mentioned that this is particularly difficult in the university environment, where ideas such as 'male privilege' and 'toxic masculinity' are often discussed. Men can feel that their intersectional identities, such as being part of the LGBTQ+ community, being from a racialized community, or being from a low-income background, among other personal characteristics and life circumstances can be overlooked, as emphasis is put on their privilege as men. Some said that this can lead to feeling like their experiences are not valid, that they don't have a legitimate reason or right to identify themselves as someone facing difficulties, because of the perception that men are a privileged demographic.

> "It feels sometimes like because I'm a man, people see me as this big, thick-skinned, tough person, simply by being a man, and when you're seen like that, it's hard to say actually no, I'm really not feeling good and I need someone to talk to about it" (Well Lads Volunteer)

> "It's important to recognise intersectionality when we talk about mental health. Being 'a man' is not a concrete or universal categorisation and there are many differences and different groups that exist within this definition when we talk about mental health ... From my own personal experience, I never really understood how being a gay man could interplay with my mental health until I went to therapy. This was when I really began to understand some of the direct and indirect pressures I had been facing. I found that being able to hear about these pressures and the simple affirmation that many of the feelings that I was experiencing were not uncommon helped me incredibly" (Well Lads Volunteer)

> "when other people face so much discrimination and inequality, sometimes I feel bad about even feeling bad, like what do I have to be worried about or to complain about? No-one is putting anything in my way simply because of who I am or what I look like. But at the same time, I am struggling and I don't know how people are going to react if I say that I need help. Are they going to judge me for being ungrateful for the life I have?" (Well Lads volunteer)

When running training on the project, a volunteer reflected on our approach to acknowledging them as experts in their own experience as one helpful way of addressing this tension:

> "I was glad that you used that phrase - nothing about us without us is for us. It made me feel like my struggles and my experiences are important, when often, and especially recently, there is a vibe on campus that men are all privileged and don't have issues in life. It was just really good to hear someone tell me my problems do matter" (Well Lads Volunteer)

In the university context, it is important to recognise this tension. Consider ways in which spaces can be created for valuable discussions of privilege and dismantling problematic social norms whilst acknowledging that identities are complex and intersectional. It is not always evident how someone identifies or how they may be feeling about themselves, and this project has shown us that men may be experiencing mental health difficulties without support because they feel pressure to be grateful for the privileges they enjoy as men, especially in the university environment. Striking the balance of tackling identity and demographic-based health inequalities, whilst encouraging all students, regardless of identity, to feel able to be open about their personal difficulties is a challenge, and it will be central to reducing stigma around accessing support for men.

Moving forward

We hope that our key learnings and our Well Lads project case study provides you with a better understanding of how you can support male students.

A core message that we hope you take from this resource is that, like all other demographic groups, men are individuals who experience intersections of identities and have differing needs. As such, there is no 'one size fits all' approach that can be taken to supporting men's mental health in higher education. It is crucial that you work with men at your institutions to understand how you can support them, and co-produce activities, initiatives and services that will make the change they want to see. You can read more about taking a co-production approach to mental health with students in Co-producing Mental Health Strategies with Students: A Guide for the Higher Education Sector, and you can hear more about what we learnt about co-producing with students on the Well Lads project in this resource.

To find out more about how you can join us in our mission to create university communities where students can thrive, have a look at our Get Involved webpage.

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