

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 6:

Why don't men seek therapy?

Suzy: Hello, and welcome to Talking Therapies – a podcast made together with Psychologies Magazine, and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzy Walker, and I'm the Editor-in-Chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. In this episode we will be discussing men and why so few seek therapy.

Music

Preview clip: Until we get fathers being proud to be fathers this idea of masculinity will continue to toxify through the generations.

Suzy: That was psychotherapist Andy Cottom. Andy is a psychodynamic psychotherapist and a counsellor, who works with people suffering emotional hardships and trauma. Shortly, Andy will be talking to Matt Nicholls, the Head of Content at UKCP, to discuss the lack of men seeking therapy.

But first, we went out to speak to people on the street and asked them why they think so few men are seeking therapy.

Street comments

Comment 1: Men think that they can deal with the problem themselves. I guess its pride as well. I think men get the impression that other people might think that you're weak

Comment 2: I think it's a lot harder for men to be vulnerable or say they're sad, so if you're holding it in its just going to be bigger and worse.

Comment 3: Well I think it's as you say, that there is a stigma attached to it. Some may think it is a sign of not being independent and not being able to sort it out by yourself.

Comment 4: So few men seek therapy because they don't think it's something they should do. Maybe there's something in their cultural or social background that suggests that they shouldn't be weak, or it's seen as somehow weak that they show their emotions or want to talk about them.

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Suzy: Mental health problems can affect anyone, but according to studies women are far more likely to be diagnosed with mental health issues. However, the rate of suicide for men is significantly higher.

So, let's find out more about why men are not accessing therapy.

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Matt: So, Andy thank you so much for coming in and talking about the big topic of why men don't seek therapy. It's probably the best question to start with: what is it that stops men from seeking therapy?

Andy: Well, it's not very macho to say that you are weak, to say that you've problem and that you might need help from somebody else. Men are brought up to believe that big boys don't cry, that it's a sign of weakness to show emotion. Therefore, they don't talk about emotion, so a lot of them don't understand the difference between anger and fear for example. They might use words like 'I'm terrified' when they just mean 'I'm a bit nervous' or 'I'm furious' when they just mean 'I'm a bit irritated' and if we don't practice talking about our emotions we can't understand them.

Matt: And is that what sort of holds them back? Because these are myths, men do cry and it is fine to, isn't it?

Andy: Men do cry of course, but there is this tradition, I'm sure you remember in the playground that a crybaby was just destined for absolute bullying and some of those scars last for 40/50 years.

Matt: Yeah, it's interesting to think that perhaps some of those fears of talking about emotion can be drilled in from childhood really.

Andy: And from your parenting. A lot of men from my parents' generation were in the second world war and

during that time they weren't allowed to feel emotions, emotions were just too powerful. Unfortunately, they can back and at the end of the war and for 40 years would never ever consider saying 'yes I was terrified.' They wouldn't talk to their wives about how they felt, they wouldn't talk to their children. So, children of my generation are still brought up with the idea that it's not a good idea to have emotions.

Matt: And that can still be fed through to the next generation down and until we sort of start to turn that tide.

Andy: Well the macho culture still exists. I mean gangster rap for example. I think grime is changing gangster rap a bit around, but the idea that it is unmanly for a footballer to be depressed ... until Dani Rose comes along opens up about it. There are these machismo cultures, you know that exist on the football terraces, in music, in gang culture of young adults who really don't have any guidance of how to learn to open up about their emotions.

Matt: It's interesting to note, recent studies have shown that suicide rates among men are dropping, but men still account for three-quarters of all suicides. Why do you think this is?

Andy: I think it's absolutely shocking that the highest killer in this country for men under 45 is suicide. It goes back to this idea of having this rather polarized version of emotions. We live in a society where everything is all or nothing, where we are encouraged to be brilliant or terrible. So, when things don't go very well, and we don't really know how to express our emotions - 'I don't know how to express myself,' apart from say I'm either 'great' or I am 'suicidal,' there's no in-between.

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Matt: We see quite a lot online about the concept of toxic masculinity, which is obviously not a psychotherapeutic concept, but people talk a lot about it and we recently heard a TV presenter saying it was unmanly for dads to carry their children in a papoose on their fronts. This sort of conversation around what's manly and what isn't can't be helpful can it for men?

Andy: I would ideally love to be Piers Morgan's therapist because I wonder what he's hiding behind that statement. Is he embarrassed about his feminine side? We all have a feminine side, we're not ... emotions,

we're all allowed to feel anger, we're all allowed to feel hatred. It isn't gender specific. I was very proud to carry my children in a Baby Bjorn, if we're allowed to advertise, it's a sort of papoose, that actually shows off I am really proud to be a father. Until we get fathers being proud to be fathers, this idea of masculinity will continue to toxify through the generations. It's just wrong.

Matt: Love that. It is, it is a ridiculous concept to say what's manly and what isn't around carrying a baby.

Andy: The moments of children being held by their fathers is just as important as that moment of being held by their mothers. We thrive off body contact, men and women. We like cuddling up, it's not unmanly to admit that, sorry.

Matt: There's no need to say sorry about it either. And that probably leads us into sort of, how can men benefit from therapy? Can it improve their relationships with each other, in their home lives?

Andy: I believe very profoundly that psychotherapy is a human right. To have access to psychotherapy, when and where you need it, transforms people. It unlocks potential in every aspect of life, be it how you relate to another human being, how you work, how you allow your feelings to happen. What I was saying early is about finding the vocabulary to express emotions. There is a difference between being frustrated, annoyed, irritated and being furious or outraged and until we talk about it we don't have any practice in understanding them and that what talking therapy can do.

Matt: And do you have any advice to men on how to access therapy, how to make that step?

Andy: Well, wouldn't it be nice if people could go to a football match and actually express that they're feeling really depressed about the fact that their marriage isn't working? We don't, we hide from our friends and therefore we've got to find somebody who isn't going to tell the rest of us: 'I saw Jimmy cry'. Oh, wouldn't that be awful? A psychotherapist is non-judgmental, we're not going to say, 'we think it's awful to cry' or 'we think it's awful to be angry.' We're going to allow that speech. Accessing psychotherapy is not that easy unfortunately. We have a campaign where we have to think about how people can start finding the right person to talk to at the right time. We can't have waiting lists of 18 months if you're feeling suicidal; I'm afraid you're not going to last. I think it is important to stress that a lot of men don't want to talk to women about their feelings, their a bit embarrassed. Shame is a major contributor to men's suicide. We feel shame enormously, especially when comparing ourselves with other men. It's important, therefore, to find the right

match, to find a psychotherapist who is going to understand a little bit about where you're coming from. I do a lot of work with the military, they're told very clearly that it's not manly to go and seek help, they're supposed to bottle it up. But when they do meet somebody who has some experience of warfare and what it's like to be in the military, then it just starts flowing and you hear stories being told of really serious emotions that they feel unable to have communicated to anyone before. It's a real privilege to hear those stories.

Matt: That's a really interesting point because we've just had the drama *Bodyguard* on the BBC, which has a lead character coming to terms with PTSD, is this something you've had to deal with, with clients?

Andy: My previous career, I worked in war zones and had an awful lot of dealings with people who were traumatised, either in the military or as witness to some really extreme behaviours of mankind. Therefore, it was a logical process for me to be a psychotherapist, specializing in trauma. Personally, I don't like the diagnosis of PTSD. I think it tends to look at the uniform rather than the man inside the uniform, it looks at symptoms rather than the reasons how those symptoms got there. But, I do believe by talking about your experiences of finding a story of how you can relate some of the horrors of war to another human being is really therapeutic and helps somebody to find a reason for their actions.

Matt: I hadn't really thought about the diagnosis versus actually what's inside the person.

Andy: I have problems with thinking of mental health treatment as being a reduction of symptoms. I'm more interested in asking why you might have experienced what you've been through, rather than what's wrong with you.

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Matt: Talking about certain industries, there's some that are perceived as more 'macho' than others. Do those affect men getting access to therapy if they're working in those industries?

Andy: It is interesting to look at whether high suicide rates are in different industries. The worst hit one is agricultural workers, the second is the construction industry. Now I have worked in a couple of documentaries about the building of skyscraper in New York and the Tate Modern, so we got to know some

of these people of construction sites very well. Unfortunately, construction workers are often a very, very long way from home. I believe isolation and loneliness is one of the biggest problems in mental health at the moment. Recently, there was a fatality on a building site I attended where there was only one other person on that whole site of about 250 people who spoke that person's particular language. He was a very lonely man. Did he fall, or did he decide to die?

Matt: That's a terrifying thought to think of people isolated in their workspaces.

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Andy: Machismo is born of competition, I fear. And the more competitive industries, where you're having to prove you're the alpha male is going to perpetuate that idea that weakness is wrong. Finance is particularly nasty. Unless you deliver the right amount of deals in a certain time, you're not only not going to get your bonus, which can be crippling emotionally, you might be bullied and say you're just not strong enough. If you go out in the city of London on a Friday night and you see bankers, other people who work in finance, guzzling down vast quantities of alcohol, because it's seen as unmanly to stop drinking, it's almost like a competition to see how intoxicated we can become. And that's the sort of culture that we need to get away from, we need to say it's ok to not have a drink on a Friday night, you're not going to be considered unmanly because of that.

Matt: Or for any industry, not just even in finance, any place, it's fine to go home on a Friday night, it's fine to go to the pub and say, 'actually I'm going to have a...'

Andy: 'A glass of water.'

Matt: Yeah

Andy: Media? Do you think that's ..?

Matt and Andy laugh

Matt: Being an ex-media person as well.

Andy: Well the military and media, finance, football, we're all these old style, let's just stick to the idea that it's manly to get drunk. I'm not so sure about that. I do think that those high-pressure professionals where you have a deadline you've got to hit, that the idea of failure isn't permissible, is again feeding into this idea that it's unmanly to carry a baby around in a papoose.

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Matt: Are there ways, perhaps, for us to spot people who might need to talk to someone?

Andy: There are the warning sign and I think there's more and more mental health awareness in companies, that are teaching people to be more emotionally intelligent, to recognize that if John is being a bit of a more recluse or he suddenly seems to be drinking a lot more, or he's talking about how sad and how desperate he feels, then it's a really good idea to intervene. I believe we need to start young, I believe we need to have our teenagers learn an awful lot more about emotional intelligence, to understand it's alright to be upset and it's a really good idea to tell somebody when you're feeling a bit miserable. Because they might remind you that life's not that bad at all.

Matt: Yeah, do you think, from your perspective, do you think the tide is turning? Do you think men are getting better at talking about their emotions and acknowledging that they may need to access therapy?

Andy: I'm encouraged from my own experience. Today I saw a number of clients who were all male and what was reassuring is that the youngest one was 18 - that's the youngest I see. He recognized that he needed to talk to somebody. So, my own clientele is coming down in age. I'm hoping, with psychology being the second most popular A-Level, there are a lot of young minds interested in the mind and I think we can tap into that and not only create the psychotherapists of the future but help clients access therapy quicker.

Matt: You talk there about seeing younger men coming to talk to you, do you think there's a problem with men of a certain age, older men, coming to engage with their emotions?

Andy: I fear so. I fear that the people who have been brought up longer in that culture of big boys don't cry have a huge stigma. The idea is that you have to be mad to access therapy. Actually, it's the sanest thing you can do.

Matt: It's very interesting you talk about that. My own father, I remember a distinct moment at his mum's funeral where he felt that he had to be given permission to be upset in front of his children and it was a really important moment for me to see that it was fine for my dad to be upset at losing someone, and that was a hugely defining moment, I suppose.

Andy: It is how many men see their fathers cry, I certainly didn't, I saw my godfather cry. It is interesting this idea of being given permission. 'Permission to be upset sir,' 'granted'. Let's give permission to the whole male population of Great Britain and the world, permission to be upset.

Matt: Absolutely.

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Matt: We see these campaigns now encouraging you to ask twice of your friends. Is that something that all men should be doing?

Andy: I believe so, I ask questions, I say 'how are you?' to my friends. If they go 'fine', I go 'really how are you? I'm interested in how you're really feeling.' FINE, is that the acronym? Let's say Frustrated

Matt laughter

Andy: Insecure, Neurotic, Emotional. Or are you really fine? I doubt it. It's better to ask twice, then three times and then four times. 'Look me in the eyes and say you're feeling fine.' If I've got doubts about you, I'm going to say, 'I don't believe you,' I'm going to say, 'what I'm hearing is you're putting on a brave face for somebody who's about to crack. Let's talk about it.'

Matt: And we don't have to all be psychotherapists to look at our friends and say, 'are you really fine? You can talk to me.'

Andy: I believe so, I think psychotherapists are just human beings who are just a bit more tuned into other people's emotions. The more we practice as psychotherapists the better we get at it. But, I became a psychotherapist after having a soggy shoulder. Everybody cried on it, they didn't know why they were crying on my shoulder, they just thought I might be a good listener.

Matt: It's probably an interesting thing to talk about how you became a therapist, leading off that. You came into therapy quite a unique way.

Andy: I don't think there's a formula for how we become therapists, it's an extraordinary unique journey that we all go through. Each individual turns to it for a certain reason. I realized that I liked listening to people's stories and rather than broadcasting them, I decided to listen to them and see if I could help them write their own stories. Narrating your own history is an important step in working out who you are. It's not the end step, but it's an important step.

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Andy: I must admit I have to be somewhat despondent about how easy it is to access good quality counselling and psychotherapy. I believe UKCP has an enormous amount of work to do. It's like changing the direction of a supertanker into making the talking cure not only destigmatized but accessible. I believe strongly we have to challenge the medical monopoly in dealing with mental health, that my serotonin levels or my adrenaline levels are probably less important than the causes for it. Loneliness, bereavement, confusion, bullying, lack of self-esteem, these are much more important ways of thinking about our mental wellbeing. And until we get some more finances, away from handing our anti-depressants, or benzos, then we've got a real struggle on our hands. If we all talk more about our emotions, if we look at Bodyguard and see that this person is struggling, not that he's struggling because he's ill or sick in any way, but because he's been through a unique experience. We can start using popular culture in a way that encourages seeking help. I believe in Bodyguard he does go for counselling eventually.

Matt: You may have just spoiled the end for people at the end.

Matt and Andy laugh

Andy: Spoiler alert

Matt and Andy laugh

Andy: But the more we can encourage people to talk about their emotions the better. Be it in the pub, you know, be it on the football terraces. I was at a certain west London football club the other day and a man was so angry I had to give him my card.

Matt and Andy laugh

Matt: So perhaps, to close, we say, don't be afraid to talk about your emotions and don't be afraid to ask your friends.

Andy: Because if you talk about your fear you're on the right step.

Matt: Brilliant thank you so much Andy, thank you for your time.

Andy: Thank you for having me.

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Suzy: That was psychotherapist Andy Cottom talking to Matt Nicholls, the Head of Content at the UK Council for Psychotherapy.

If, after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and look for the Find A Therapist tab.

We are also featuring the subject of men, and why so few seek therapy in Psychologies magazine this month. Or you can find us online at: www.psychologies.co.uk.

We'll be doing a podcast each month for the next year with some of the UKCP's psychotherapists, and remember like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first and it helps others find us. So, join us again next month

Till then, thank you for listening, and take good care of yourselves.

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