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7 Secrets for Keeping a Million Men Alive

By

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"If you could make male mortality rates the same as female rates, you would do more good than curing cancer." Randolph M. Nesse, M.D.

When I was five-years old and my father was forty-two, he tried to [commit suicide](#). The stresses of trying to earn a living and provide for his family during difficult economic times overwhelmed him. Though he didn't die physically, he was crippled emotionally and our lives were never the same. I grew up wondering [what happened to my father](#) and to so many other wounded fathers.

According to the National Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, each year nearly 35,000 people kill themselves. 28,000 (nearly 80%) are male. Eleven times that number attempt suicide.

But suicide isn't the only way men's lives are cut short. "80 percent of all illnesses are [stress](#) induced," says Woodson Merrell, MD, Chairman of the Department of Integrative Medicine at Beth Israel Medical Center. Although stress impacts everyone, men are particularly vulnerable. According to social scientist Dr. Thomas Joiner, "Males experience higher mortality rates than females at all stages of life from conception to old age."

Statistics from the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention show that men have a higher death rate for the ten leading causes of death (numbers are deaths per 100,000 population):

Cause of Death	Men	Women	Male/Female Ratio
Heart Disease	248.5	162.2	1.5
Cancer	220.1	153.6	1.4
Injuries (Unintentional)	55.2	25.5	2.1
Cerebrovascular disease	43.9	42.6	1.03
Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease	47.6	35.9	1.3
Diabetes	27.4	20.1	1.4
Pneumonia/flu	21.2	15.5	1.4
HIV Infection	5.9	2.2	2.7
Suicide	18	4.5	4
Homicide	9.7	2.5	3.9

"Over 330,000 lives would be saved in a single year in the U.S. alone if men's risk of dying was as low as women's," says University of Michigan researcher, Daniel J. Kruger, PhD. "Being male is now the single largest demographic factor for early death," says Kruger's colleague, Randolph M. Nesse, M.D.

Seven Secrets for Keeping Men Alive

Some people have come to believe that men don't live as long or as well as women simply because...well, because we are men. There's an assumption that our problems are built into our genes, and there's nothing we can do about them. But recent research has shown there are things men do, or fail to do, that affect our health. In his book, *Dying to be Men*, health researcher Will Courtenay, Ph.D. has found a number of practices that can improve men's health and longevity. Here are seven that I think are particularly important.

1. Improve how men eat and sleep.

Men are more often overweight than women, and they have less healthy dietary habits. They eat more meat, fat, and salt and less fiber, fruits, and vegetables than women. They have higher cholesterol and blood pressure, and they do less to lower them. Men use fewer medications, vitamins, and dietary supplements. They also sleep less, and less well, and they stay in bed to recover from illness for less time than women.

2. Encourage men to play it safe.

Men and adolescent males engage in more reckless and illegal driving and they drive drunk more frequently than women and adolescent females. They also have more sexual partners than women and engage in significantly more high-risk physical activities—such as dangerous sports and leisure-time activities—and physical fights. They are also more likely than women to carry guns or other weapons, and they engage in more criminal activity.

3. Stop abusing our boys.

Men and boys are more likely than women and girls to be the victims of physical abuse or violence. For example, nearly half of men nationally have been punched or beaten by a person—in most cases by another man. We often think that sexual abuse happens only to females, but 5 percent of boys (compared to 10 percent of girls) report having been sexually abused. Many believe that male sexual abuse is under-reported.

4. Say goodbye to deadly traditional masculinity.

There is a high level of agreement among people in the United States regarding typical feminine and masculine characteristics. Men and boys, in particular, experience a great deal of social pressure to conform to these stereotypic characteristics. These dominant [norms of masculinity](#) dictate, for example, that men should be self-reliant, strong, robust, and tough; that men should welcome danger; and that men should never reveal vulnerability, back down, or do anything “feminine.” These idealized norms of

masculinity create a conflict with actions that we could do to take care of ourselves or to be taken care of by those who love us.

5. Let men know we want them to express emotions and acknowledge distress.

In general, women are more emotionally expressive than men—except when it comes to expressing anger. Men also report less fear or emotional distress than women do, and they are less likely than women to cry. Men’s inexpressiveness can have both direct and indirect effects on their health and wellbeing. Self-disclosure, for example, is associated with improvements in immune functioning and physical health. Men are also more likely than women to exhibit emotionally inexpressive Type A behavior and to experience or express hostility, both of which are strongly linked with increased health risks—particularly for cardiovascular disease. Men are also disinclined to discuss experiences of pain or physical distress.

6. Help men deal with the stresses of unemployment.

With our economic system going through major transformations, more people are unemployed. Unemployment is consistently linked with a variety of negative health effects, and there is evidence that these negative effects are greater for men than for women. Unemployed men are more likely to commit suicide than unemployed women. One study among youth found that unemployment is also a risk factor for increased alcohol consumption, increased tobacco use, illicit drug use, suicide, and unintentional injuries, particularly for males.

An editorial in the March 2011 issue of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* indicates that depression rates in men are likely to increase due to increasing job loss for men. The study’s lead author, Boadie Dunlop, M.D., from Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta writes, “Compared to women, many men attach a great importance to their roles as providers and protectors of their families. Failure to fulfill the role of breadwinner is associated with greater depression and marital conflict.” Dunlop goes on to say, “The recent recession afflicting Western economies serves as a harbinger of the economic future for men, especially for those with lower levels of education. Dubbed by some the ‘Mancession,’ the economic downturn has hit men, and their families, particularly hard.”

7. Support men to reach out and touch someone.

Men have much smaller social networks than women do. Men and boys also have fewer, less intimate friendships, and they are less likely to have a close confidant, particularly someone other than a spouse. Men’s restricted social networks limit their levels of social support. In times of stress, for example, men mobilize less varied social supports than women. There is consistent evidence that the lack of social support is a

risk factor for premature death—especially for men. Men with the [lowest levels of social support](#) are two to three times more likely to die than men with the highest levels of social support. Men's social isolation significantly decreases their chance of survival of heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

If we could focus on improving these seven aspects of men's lives, we could save nearly a million men in three years. Think what this would mean to our fathers, sons, and brothers. Think what it would mean to our mothers, daughters, and sisters.

For more please engage with the [MenAlive Blog](#).