

# Lost boys

Men's mental health issues are responsible for many of society's greatest ills. So how prevalent is the problem in WA, and what's being done to address it? words Georgina Barker



“If five whales beached themselves on Bondi Beach it would be front-page news, broadcast all over the world. Enormous money, effort and resources would be utilised in trying to save them. Yet we lose five Australian men a day to suicide alone and we seem to accept that.” (Tony Miller, founder, Dads in Distress)

In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for men under the age of 44, significantly exceeding the national road toll. In 2011 there were nearly 2300 reported suicides. More than three-quarters of these were men. There's recognition of an under-reporting of suicide by up to 30 per cent.

“Globally, there's a belief that we're sitting on top of a tsunami,” says Youth Focus CEO Jenny Allen. “This issue is very relevant. Very real.”

Jenny points to alarming stats from the Global Burden of Disease 2010 report, which shows suicide's grisly toll. Around the world, in 2010 self-harm took 883,715 lives, which is more than war, murder and natural disasters combined. In wealthy countries, suicide is the leading cause of death for men in their 40s and a top-five killer of men in their 50s.

Depression and anxiety are precursors to a high proportion of these deaths. On average in Australia, one in eight men will have depression and one in five men will experience anxiety at some stage of their lives. Half our young men aged 16 to 25 feel stressed and nearly one in 10 have thoughts about suicide. Mental illness in young men aged 12 to 25 costs the Australian economy \$3.27 billion per annum, or \$387,000 per hour in lost productivity across a year.

Men's mental health issues play out at a high level right across society. Statistics of suicide, premature death, accidents, violence, crime and addiction are dominated by men. Then there's the domino effect. Men who have been victims themselves tend to hurt others in the form of physical and sexual violence, other crimes and antisocial behaviour, marriage breakdowns, alcohol and drug abuse, and moral bankruptcy.

The personal cost, community cost and economic cost is staggering. Although awareness

who have three times the death rate of young women – as well as higher rates of suicide, men are also much more likely to engage in risky behaviour and adopt self-created ‘rites of passage’ to prove their manhood (hoon driving, binge-drinking, sleeping with many partners).

In the analysis of men struggling in life and the resulting societal problems, recurring themes are lack of male role models and emotional and spiritual support as they transition from boyhood to manhood, and an inability to

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is improving, there remains a stigma around mental health and avoiding the conversation is often the fallback position, something that does little to help these men, for whom avoidance of the issue is often one of the biggest problems.

For decades there was a focus on helping women as they broke out of traditional roles and restrictions across career, education, sexuality and family roles, and as a result, women's lives have been transformed.

But what about our men? Our men, who make up more than 90 per cent of our prison populations, carry out 90 per cent of our acts of violence, and make up 70 per cent of the victims? Our men, who make up 80 per cent of the homeless. Our young men (aged 15 to 25)

seek help when they are stressed, depressed or trying to cope with adversity.

“A lot of men don't have any skill sets around managing their stress,” says psychologist Dr Brian Graetz, from Beyond Blue. “Women are better at talking about their issues. They have the capacity to identify someone who can support them. That's the key issue. Women are so much better at reaching out for help.”

“There is a gender difference,” says Jenny Allen. “People keep saying men need to take on their feminine side. But it's ludicrous because males and females are made differently. Men don't want to sit and have a coffee and chew it over. They may be willing to tell their story but they want action.”

They are also more likely to want to solve things for themselves, says Associate Professor



At Christian Brothers College in Fremantle, The Rite Journey program helps male students transition to adulthood.



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Jane Burns, CEO of Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre. “There’s also the perception that if they put their hand up and say they’re struggling they will be seen as weak. This comes back to the way we portray men as being strong, able to problem-solve; that all-encompassing strong male stereotype.

“Men are more likely to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol,” adds Jane. “By the time they are likely to get help, those behaviours have become entrenched, impacting on their relationships and their capacity to enjoy life and engage in work.”

Today’s men are dealing with the historical pressures of being the breadwinners, and providing security and safety for their family. But many are also more aware of their role as a parent, father figure and partner, the need to be emotionally literate and express their emotions, and to what extent they should be like their own father.

Brian says this mix of roles and knowing who and what to be is something a lot of men struggle with. “What is the male identity these days? There are lots of conflicting identities – hard and tough, resilient and resourceful, or warm and fuzzy new age guys. A lot of men growing up aren’t too sure.”

Much of this comes down to father figures and role models – or lack of them. During the



The Fremantle Men's Shed was WA's first initiative of the Australian Men's Shed Association model.

20th century, fathers weren’t particularly engaged in their children’s lives. They put food on the table, a roof over their family’s heads and didn’t talk much. When stress hit, their coping mechanism was to reach for a beer or head to the pub. And this is what the kids saw; the kids who are today’s adults.

Australian author, activist and psychologist Steve Biddulph says role modelling is how we

learn to be human – the child becomes a bundle of all the role models they’ve been exposed to. For a boy to become patient, generous and kind he has to see patience, generosity and kindness. To learn restraint, commitment, tenderness, stability, calmness and coping mechanisms, exuberance and humour, the boy needs to spend time with men who demonstrate these traits and make them desirable and admirable.

## “Men were the soldiers, the miners, the factory fodder, the corporate drones... We lost the linkages by which healthy manhood is shaped and passed along.”

Without those role models, the boy can’t possibly acquire these traits.

Steve believes that during the fast-paced 20th century – defined by war, economic depression, more war, relocation and emigration – intergenerational wounds were opened up and not addressed. “Men were at the bruising end of things – we were the soldiers, the miners, the factory fodder, the corporate drones,” he writes in his book *The New Manhood*. “We lost the linkages by which healthy manhood is shaped and passed along.

“The result is footballers who act like idiots, drunken jobs in the streets, young men who rape or kill... but most often, just men who do not know where they are going in their lives. Encompassing billions of men, this adds up to a world in trouble.”

The importance of father figures, male role models and providing emotional and spiritual

support during the transition from boyhood to manhood is a conversation that has been gaining momentum. There’s increasing recognition that traditional cultures around the world actually have a reason for performing coming-of-age rituals and initiations. It’s all about managing the emotional and spiritual development of men, the transition from boy to man, the shift from child psychology to healthy adult psychology.

Through these rituals and initiations, the young man recognises that he is no longer the centre of the universe and that he must now take responsibility for his actions – that he has serious adult responsibilities and must look to the future, look after the resources and form relationships with females. These young men gain a deep and profound sense of belonging within their community.

But in our modern cultures, boys are raised principally by their mothers and often receive



According to The Rite Journey founder Andrew Lines, schools are the most effective environment in which to promote social change. "They are the place to reach the most people."

**"A good dad and a few good uncles, teachers who are friendly and show how a good man behaves – it doesn't seem too much to ask."**

little teaching, affection and example from their fathers or other male figures to help them grow into mature men. The resulting adults have been called 'boy-men', with little sense of who they should be or how they should be behaving, because no one taught them how to be real men. Good men.

"A good dad and a few good uncles, teachers who are friendly and show how a good man behaves – it doesn't seem too much to ask," writes Steve Biddulph. "But these ingredients almost disappeared from the lives of boys. Without this training, boys' bodies still grow into men's bodies, but they were not given the knowledge and skills to match. They didn't get the 'software' for how to be male."

There appears to be an unspoken notion of what's normal, something that can only be achieved by suppressing urges, feelings and instincts and seeking to conform. But you can only wear a mask for so long before cracks start to show and life begins to break down. Far from belonging, a lot of men feel isolated – and social isolation has been identified as one of the main causes of mental illness in men.

The father-son paradigm is changing. Young fathers today are typically much more involved with their children compared with previous generations. Some research indicates a trebling of father time in one generation. But it's not uniform and there's a long way to go.

"The importance of the role of the father has long been underestimated," says Jenny Allen. "In the last few years there's been a better awareness in the importance of role modelling. We know that boys with a strong bond/relationship with their fathers are less likely to be risk-taking. The awareness is there, but there's a lot of work to do. It's very hard for it to get better when there's a 50 per cent divorce rate."

Big Brothers Big Sisters is a mentoring program that tries to fill the void by facilitating the development of long-term, supportive, one-to-one friendships between an adult volunteer and a young person aged seven to 17. Proven outcomes include educational success, avoidance of risky behaviours, and socio-emotional competency, including higher aspirations, greater confidence and better relationships.

Similarly, there are various rites of passage programs for adolescent men. The Rite Journey,

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which supports the development of self-aware, engaged, responsible and resilient young adults, runs for a full year as part of the Year 9 curriculum in some Australian schools. It is also being picked up by schools in other countries.

Program founder Andrew Lines says the beauty of The Rite Journey is that it takes place within a community of sorts – the school. "A major part of initiations or rites of passage is the expectation – they have to live up to what they have transitioned into," says Andrew. "The whole year level goes through it. It's a distinct change for all of the kids, but they get continued support from the school."

"To create a social change, we have to have thousands and thousands of kids go through something like this and be conscious of the transition to adulthood. The ripple effect will be more significant the more kids who do it. Schools are the one place that most

people go through. They are the place to reach the most people."

In schools, in the home and within communities; if we can get the right emotional guidance in these places so our boys can learn what it means to be a good man, and how to grow into a healthy, happy fulfilled man who has a strong sense of belonging, maybe the ripple effect will turn into a tide of change that will stop the scourge of mental health illness and suicide.

"It's time we all looked at this catastrophe and instead of thinking this happens to others, we need to be aware of mental health – the finality of suicide is something that this community needs to take ownership of," says Jenny Allen. "It's no use blaming everything and everybody else because when you look at it, it is humanity destroying humanity. It's happening. Let's stop burying it under the carpet." **S**



Role models are essential for helping boys and young men develop positive traits.

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# Where to turn for help

The current State Government has invested significant time and money in mental health. In 2010, WA became the first state to establish a Mental Health Commission, with a separate budget and the appointment of a commissioner and WA's first Minister for Mental Health to implement reform. Some states followed quickly and some are following now. Still, many people don't know where to turn for help.

## Young Men's Project

Youth Focus (WA) recently gathered a group of experienced and committed people from Orygen Research Institute (Victoria), Black Dog Institute and Inspire Foundation (NSW) to form the Young Men's Project. The project is aimed at reducing the incidence of suicide in young men. Its objectives include developing evidence-based therapeutic models and ensuring mental health problems in young men aged 12 to 25 years are a high national priority.

## Embracing technology

The report from the first Young and Well National Survey, released in July this year, identifies alarming statistics about our young men and suggests our current mental health system is failing them. However, it also offers new hope for improving mental health and wellbeing by identifying new methods of engagement with young men via technology that matches their usage and behaviour online.

"Taking services into the online community is a shift from the way we've thought about mental health services previously," says Young and Well CRC CEO, Associate Professor Jane Burns. "It can be available 24/7, not confined to doctor surgery hours. It can be anonymous, delivered in a way they feel comfortable with. It can be on their terms - they are empowered in this space, comfortable in this space, they don't have to get out of their comfort zone to talk about it."

## Changing our language

Beyond Blue's Man Therapy is a Commonwealth Government-funded online resource targeting men under 55. It was launched at the start of June this year and by mid-August had received more than 180,000 visits, of which 150,000 were unique visits.

Visitors to Man Therapy are greeted by a blokey guy, not a health professional, who talks about the universals of life - eating, sleeping and so on. He asks if life is weighing you down (not "Do you have a mental health disorder?").

Beyond Blue Men's Program Leader Tass Mousaferiadis says the research undertaken during the development of Man Therapy was

fascinating. "We learnt that the way we frame seeking help for men really matters. To tell men to seek help is very emasculating," explains Tass. "We now talk about taking action, taking control, which is much more empowering language and speaks well to men because of the way we're programmed."

For over 55s there's The Shed Online, which is an initiative of Beyond Blue, the Movember Association and the Australian Men's Shed Association. Online discussions range from how to cook a successful barbecue to cancer and depression.

## Nearly 1000 Men's Sheds offer social inclusion

On the surface, the 976 Men's Sheds across Australia are places for men to tinker with tools or share a cuppa, but one of the main objectives is to advance the wellbeing and health of the shed's members and to encourage social inclusion.

In three years there's been a 300 per cent growth in the number of sheds across the country and the initiative has also taken off internationally, which Australian Men's Shed Association CEO David Helmers never envisaged when the association was formally established in 2007.

"Some men are compelled to ring and thank us, sometimes sharing personal stories about how they had been close to suicide, they didn't know what was wrong with them, they lacked male companionship and belonging in the community," says David. "We also get spouses and daughters calling to say how they've seen their husband or father change dramatically in such a short time from their involvement in the shed."

## Raising awareness

Now in its seventh year, the annual Men in Black Ball is more than just a major event on Perth's social calendar. The ball, which attracts 450 well-heeled guests, raises awareness of men's mental health and wellbeing through high-profile testimonial speakers. The next event will be happening in winter 2014. For more information, visit [momentumwf.com.au](http://momentumwf.com.au).

## Crisis resources

**Men's Line Australia** 1300 789 978

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

**ReachOut.com (young men)**

**eheadspace.org.au**

**mantherapy.org.au**

**theshedonline.org.au**

**dadsindistress.asn.au**



The ages of the Fremantle Men's Shed members range from nine to 99. "Fathers bring their sons and the social implications are amazing," says president Bill Johnstone. "It creates an intergenerational activity that doesn't seem to happen anywhere else."

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