



The Silence of the Men

Men are reluctant to talk about their health problems

Perhaps it has something to do with the male ego. Women are generally quite open when discussing health issues, whereas men often regard them as unmanly. I suspect the root of the problem lies in traditional roles – men do the work; women take care of the home and have children. Although things have changed in modern times, a man's continuing self-belief that he has to stay aloof and strong, no matter what, leads to the need-to-know syndrome; and when applied to his own state of health, keeping secrets can be disastrous for all concerned. A story on the 6 o'clock news a fortnight ago exemplifies this, and I make no apologies for relating it.

It was, apparently, a murder suicide. A grandfather had shot dead his wife, daughter, her four children; and then turned the gun on himself. The tragedy is being reported as the worst of its kind in Western Australia's recent history. Investigations continue to discover what triggered something so terrible. There are suggestions that the true cause may never be known. It seems undeniable, however, that the man was sufficiently troubled to warrant taking such drastic measures to resolve his personal crisis.

I mention this horrific incident not to shock, but because it is an extreme consequence of a man's desperation; and I am convinced two major factors contributed to his actions - isolation and deprivation. Although, in this case, they are words describing the physical location of the family, and the aftermath of the daughter's marriage break-up, both tangible circumstances; it should be considered that they may also have applied to the grandfather's general health, particularly if he kept it to himself. It doesn't go without saying that there would be medical records; not if he avoided visiting the doctor. As for his state of mind, the turmoil fermenting inside his head will remain a mystery. Had he been able to speak about his worries with someone, anyone, he and his family might be alive today; but he was a man, and men don't do that.

Sadly, and I am inclined to think because of this, men can become islands of their own volition. They might be prepared to talk about everyday happenings, even share concerns of a practical nature; it would seem, however, the subject of their own health is taboo. This code of silence tends to feed on itself; and as time goes by, reluctance to mention symptoms, particularly the medical kind, often exacerbates the condition; and men become even more tight-lipped. Many seem reluctant to seek medical advice. Why is that – are they embarrassed to discuss personal, sensitive issues with another; or are they afraid that procedures necessary for a cure might be invasive and undignified? Despite the fact that women have to endure and accept these inconveniences throughout life, men refuse to be dictated to by them. So, if they say nothing, the only problem they mistakenly believe they have will hopefully go away of its own accord, eventually.

Unfortunately, men often regard worrying over personal health issues as a weakness. Most are not prepared to admit having an ounce of sensitivity in their bodies; and, it would seem, this blinkered view extends to their health. They may well insist that a partner or friend seek medical advice when something is apparently wrong; reasoning that, if left too long, resulting complications can be difficult to remedy; particularly with regard to cancer and similar diseases. As for their children, they know that the earlier a condition is diagnosed, the better the chances of a satisfactory resolution. From the man's perspective as head of the household, his job is to ensure those in his care are fit and healthy; otherwise it's another worry on his plate. He will regard this attitude as totally unselfish; when, in effect, it is the reverse.

By keeping his own health problems closeted, not only is he doing himself a disservice because any untended medical condition is likely to worsen; but he is also putting pressure on others who know something is wrong from his changed behavioural patterns. They are the ones who have to tolerate his mood swings and increasing stress levels which, in turn, affects their health; both mentally and physically. Even a suggestion that he should see the doctor to get something for an obvious ailment like a virus infection or bronchitis could trigger the macho response: "What do doctors know? I can fix it myself." Occasionally, that may be right; but those internal, invisible symptoms are often far more complicated and a self-cure shouldn't even be contemplated. So, they say nothing, and soldier on bravely.

They like to think, in their own eyes at least, that they are some kind of martyr; and they are, in a way; because, after the martyrs have done the deed, everyone else is left to pick up the tab. Unselfish? I think not. Brave? More likely very afraid. As for secretive: even when The Silence of the Men becomes so loud it is almost deafening; they seem to be the only ones who can't hear it!

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