



# How to help men struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts

**By Tyson Hawkins, Optum Idaho Peer Support Specialist and Recovery Coach**

Many of us in Idaho have felt the devastating impact of depression-linked suicide. Directly or indirectly, we've been left to process these traumas—and to ponder the incomprehensible answer to the question: “Why?”

Suicide, in all its forms and outcomes, is most often the final desperate act of surrender in a fight against depression. This battle can last weeks, months or even years and commonly occurs in the secret shadows of the mind.

Depression applies constant pressure upon the individual—hopelessness, worthlessness, grief, guilt/shame, apathy and isolation are among the damaging emotions people suffering from depression can struggle with.

**Depression applies constant pressure which can feel like hopelessness, worthlessness, grief, apathy, guilt/shame or isolation.**

Too many Idahoans and their loved ones have lost this battle. Unfortunately, the data illustrates a particularly concerning trend among adult men. Ahead of National Men's Health Month in June, it's important to understand ways to help the men in our lives who may be struggling with depression.

As a military veteran and in my work as a Peer Support Specialist and recovery coach, I have personally experienced and witnessed the effects of unrecognized and untreated depression and the ensuing consequences.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about six million men suffer from depression annually. Men typically choose more lethal methods when attempting to take their lives and therefore complete suicide two to four times more than women. And yet we know men are far less likely to seek professional help.

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**If you're feeling suicidal or in crisis, please call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. You can also chat at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org).**

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**If you think a man in your life may be struggling with depression, help him find a mental health professional or speak with his medical doctor about his symptoms.**

But the American Psychological Association reports traditional signs of depression—sadness, worthlessness, excessive guilt—may not be how many men exhibit depression. Fatigue, irritability, anger, loss of interest in work or hobbies, may be more common indicators of clinical depression in men. Among older men, it may be harder for physicians to recognize depression when a man has compounding medical diagnoses such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer or stroke.

Our best chance at reducing the damage to our friends, families and society caused by depression is recognition of the illness and finding treatment. That starts with an awareness that you, or someone close to you, is going through something. This awareness can only truly be achieved through open and honest communication with your loved one or personal self-reflection.

If you think a man in your life may be struggling with depression, help him find a mental health professional or speak with his medical doctor about his symptoms. Men may be willing to talk to a health care professional about physical issues and, gradually, discuss mental health.

You may decide you want to ask your treatment provider about peer services as well. Peer services are a tremendous resource available to people struggling with depression. A peer support specialist is someone living in recovery from their own mental health illness and can often foster a meaningful connection through shared experiences. While role-modeling recovery, they can provide unique support and guidance utilizing a non-clinical, peer-to-peer approach.

## Knowing the signs and how to help

### What causes depression in men?

- Genetic factors, such as a family history of depression or self-harm
- Environmental stress, such as financial pressure, work problems or relationship changes
- Illness, such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, Parkinson's Disease or even side effects of medications taken for medical conditions

### What are signs of depression in men?

- Anger, irritability or aggressiveness
- Feeling anxious, restless or “on the edge”
- Loss of interest in work, family or once-pleasurable activities
- Problems with sexual desire and performance
- Feeling sad, “empty,” flat or hopeless
- Not being able to concentrate or remember details
- Feeling very tired, not being able to sleep or sleeping too much
- Overeating or not wanting to eat at all
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts
- Physical aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems
- Inability to meet the responsibilities of work, caring for family or other important activities
- Engaging in high-risk activities
- A need for alcohol or drugs
- Withdrawing from family and friends or becoming isolated

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**A Peer Support Specialist is an individual living in recovery from their own mental illness and can often foster a meaningful connection through shared experiences.**

## How you can help a man in your life who is depressed?

If you think a man in your life may be struggling with depression, help him find a mental health professional or speak with his medical doctor about his symptoms. Men may be willing to talk to a health care professional about physical issues and, gradually, discuss mental health. You may decide you want to ask your treatment provider about Peer Services as well. Peer Services represent another tremendous resource available to members who are struggling with depression. A Peer Support Specialist is an individual living in recovery from their own mental health illness and can often foster a meaningful connection through shared experiences. While role-modeling recovery and inspiring hope, they can provide unique support and guidance utilizing a non-clinical, peer-to-peer approach.

### Other ways to help

- Offering him support, understanding, patience and encouragement
- Listening carefully and talking with him
- Never ignoring comments about suicide, and alerting his therapist or doctor
- Helping him increase his level of physical and social activity by inviting him out for hikes, games and other events; if he says, “no,” keep trying, but don’t push him to take on too much too soon
- Encouraging him to report any concerns about medications to his health care provider
- Ensuring that he gets to his doctor’s appointments
- Reminding him that with time and treatment, the depression will lift

Remember, if you or someone you know has Medicaid insurance, Optum Idaho outpatient mental health and substance use disorder treatment benefits are automatically included at no cost. Call Optum Idaho’s Member Access and Crisis Line at **1-855-202-0973**, available 24/7, to speak confidentially to a trained professional who can help you find the right care with one of our Optum Idaho providers.

## Support Resources in Idaho

If you need additional help, seek advice from your healthcare provider.

**If you need immediate crisis help**, you can call or text the National and Idaho Suicide & Crisis Helpline at **988**, or chat at **988lifeline.org**. Someone is available to help you 24/7.



**2-1-1 Idaho Careline:** Dial **211** or **1-800-926-2588** or text **898211** to speak with a resource specialist for health and human services available in your community.

**Optum Idaho’s 24/7 Member Access and Crisis Line:** **1-855-202-0973** (TDD/TTY services at **711** for the hearing impaired) or visit **optumidaho.com**.

**Free Mental Health First Aid classes** available from Optum Idaho can help better equip you to help someone in crisis. For more information about upcoming classes in your local area, email [idaho.communications@optum.com](mailto:idaho.communications@optum.com).



Sources: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/men-and-depression>  
<https://www.apa.org/topics/men-boys/depression>  
<https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/a38241141/guide-to-starting-therapy-mental-health/>