

## COMMENTARY

# Men's mental health: Why it matters to all of us



CHOY FELIX

JUNE IS Men's Mental Health Month. That might not sound like headline news to some, but it should be.

Every year, more and more men across the world are silently struggling with depression, anxiety, trauma and other mental health issues. Many don't seek help. Some don't even talk about it and far too many pay the ultimate price by dying young, dying alone, or dying by suicide.

In TT, men account for the vast majority of suicide deaths. Ministry of Health data show that from 2016 to 2019, there were 310 male suicides, rising to 343 between 2020 and 2023. Since 2020, approximately 83 per cent of all suicide victims have been men – four out of every five cases. This rate is significantly higher than the global average, where men are typically twice as likely as women to die by suicide.

The data point to a quiet crisis, one often buried under stigma, silence and the pressure to "tough it out."

This isn't just a health issue. It's a social one. And yes, it's a matter of equality.

At the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) we exist to protect the rights of everyone in TT to live, work, and participate fully in society without discrimination; and while we often speak up for the rights of historically marginalised groups, it's also important to talk about how traditional ideas about masculinity,

**'Let's create a culture where men can speak freely, seek help without shame and be met with understanding rather than judgement'**

stigma and social pressure can negatively affect men too.

Mental health doesn't discriminate, but society often does.

## The silent struggle

Let's start with the reality: Men are far less likely than women to seek professional help for mental health issues. Cultural expectations play a big part in this. From a young age, many boys are taught to "man up," "be strong," and "don't cry." Vulnerability is seen as a weakness and talking about your feelings is often discouraged.

By adulthood, this emotional bottling-up becomes a habit. But repressing emotions doesn't make them go away; it just buries them deeper. This can lead to increased rates of substance abuse, violence and even suicide. In TT, as in many other countries, men are more likely to die by suicide and less likely to access counselling or therapy.

We also see this playing out in the workplace. A man may be struggling silently with anxiety but doesn't feel safe taking time off or even asking for help. If he does, he might fear being judged as "unfit," "soft," or "not leadership material." That's not just a personal problem; it's a systemic one.

## What does this have to do with the EOC?

The Equal Opportunity Act protects people against discrimination in four broad areas: employment, education, the provision of goods and services, and accommodation. It also recognises several categories of protection, including sex, disability and mental health status.

Mental health is covered under the category of disability. This means a person should not face discrimination in any public space because of depression, anxiety, PTSD, or any other mental health condition. They

have a right to be treated fairly, with dignity and respect.

So, when men avoid seeking mental health support because they fear stigma or workplace repercussions, we're looking at a rights issue; and when workplaces don't create supportive environments, or when systems fail to accommodate those with mental health conditions, the EOC can investigate and conciliate.

But beyond legal protection, our mandate includes promoting understanding and education. That's why this month and every month we want to encourage open, honest conversations about mental health, especially among men.

## We all have a role to play

Creating a more equal society includes making space for men to feel, speak and heal. That doesn't mean downplaying the struggles of others. It means recognising that equality involves addressing everyone's barriers including those shaped by gender norms.

## So, what can we as men do?

- Talk openly: Whether it's with a friend, colleague or relative, start a conversation. Let the men in your life know it's okay not to be okay.

- Check your workplace culture: Are there policies and practices that support mental wellness for all staff? Are people encouraged to take mental health days, access counselling, or request reasonable accommodations?

- Challenge harmful stereotypes: Statements like "real men don't cry" or "he's just weak" are not just outdated; they're dangerous.

- Know your rights:

If you or someone you know is being treated unfairly at work, in school, or in accessing services because of a mental health condition, you can contact the EOC. Our role is to investigate, support, conciliate and protect your rights to equal treatment.

## A healthier society is a fairer one

Men's mental health isn't just a "men's issue." It's a community issue. Families, workplaces, and entire societies function better when people, regardless of gender, are supported and well.

Let's create a culture where men can speak freely, seek help without shame and be met with understanding rather than judgement. That's not just good for men, it's good for all of us.

And for the men reading this – stay up, kings. We see you. Life doesn't always make space for men to pause, to breathe, to say, "I'm not okay." But you matter, and your mental health matters. You don't have to carry it all on your own. Talk to someone, lean on your support system and give yourself permission to rest when you need to. There's strength in being honest about your struggles and feelings and there's no shame in seeking help. You are not alone, and you are not weak; you are human. Keep pushing, keep showing up. You've got this, king.

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"The cost of dealing with crime in business operations is too high... We need to get serious and reclaim TT from the criminal elements,"

TT Chamber president Sonji Pierre-Chase.



**A FATHER'S LOVE:** Marvin De Verteuil gives his daughter Alora a big kiss while going about their day on Henry Street, Port of Spain, on June 14. PHOTO BY FAITH AYOUNG