Men and Counselling: the changing relationship between men in the UK and therapy

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In February 2014 a survey completed by a focus group of 250 BACP members revealed that compared to five years ago, 62% had a higher percentage of male clients. In addition to this, 72% agreed with the statement that 'men are more likely to see a counsellor or psychotherapist now than they were five years ago'.

These statistics back up further anecdotal evidence from our members that more men are seeking counselling than ever before. What has caused this shift? We asked Andrew Reeves, a BACP Governor and counsellor who specialises in working with men. Andrew says:

"Traditionally, more women than men have sought counselling, and this is in itself not a surprise. The concept of talking about feelings and exploring emotional and psychological difficulties has, for many years, been seen as a 'female' rather than 'male' trait. This has been embedded in gender socialisation and how women and men consider and evaluate themselves. However, things are beginning to change with more men seeking counselling and seeing it as both a positive and relevant source of help."

It seems that more men are seeking counselling than in the past because of a gradual shifting of attitudes about gender roles, as well as a growing recognition of the benefits of counselling itself. But are these necessarily good developments, and are counselling and psychotherapy effective ways of coping with men's emotional problems and mental health problems? Andrew believes so:

"Men have emotional needs in exactly the same way as women: they feel things such as anger, grief, shame, sadness and anxiety in the same way. The difference is that women have traditionally been 'allowed' to name these feelings and to seek support for them, while men have been silenced through male gender roles and have felt the need to keep their emotions secret, adding feelings of shame and isolation to the emotional mix.

Despite the recent increase in the number of men seeking counselling, numbers are still low compared to women, and there is evidence that men are considerably more likely than women to strongly oppose the idea of counselling for anything other than serious mental health problems. In a recent public attitudes survey commissioned by BACP men were twice as likely as women to strongly agree with the statement 'It is self-indulgent to seek counselling or psychotherapy if you do not have a serious problem'. We already know that men are at high risk of suicide across all age groups, but particularly men under 50. This is a compelling compelling reason why men should be encouraged to talk through their concerns with a professional counsellor. With this in mind, what is being done by counselling services themselves to inspire more men to seek help? Andrew has first-hand experience in this area:

"While there are increasing numbers of counselling services specifically for men, more common is that existing services are considering how they can make what they offer more male-friendly. For example, in the service in which I work we have established, with the support of CALM, a male-friendly access point for young male students in a university setting. Called Men's Space, it is a drop-in service for male students and staff, staffed by the male counsellors in the service. Like all such initiatives, take-up was slow at the beginning but as it became more established the use of the service has steadily increased so that young men are now accessing the service on a weekly basis with the overall number of men then going on to full counselling in the main service increasing. These initiatives can be seen across a wide range of services throughout the UK."

With the number of men seeking counselling increasing, and a similar upturn in the number of male-friendly services, it is perhaps surprising that of BACP's membership of just over 40,000 practicing counsellors and psychotherapists, less than 20% are male. Andrew thinks that the explanation for this lack of male counsellors is down to the familiar reasons of historic gender roles, but that it's set to change:

"Ultimately, the provision of counselling needs to reflect the communities it serves, incorporating a broad mix of culture, disability, difference and gender. As more men seek out counselling and experience positive outcomes as a consequence, more men are then likely to consider counselling training as a viable and positive option."

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Find out more about CALM, the Campaign Against Living Miserably: http://www.thecalmzone.net/

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