

Men and Depression



(February 26, 2007) -- NEW YORK, Feb. 18 /PRNewswire/ -- Six million American men will be diagnosed with depression this year. But millions more suffer silently, unaware that their problem has a name or are unwilling to seek treatment. As Assistant Editor Julie Scelfo reports in the February 26 Newsweek cover story, "Men and Depression", although depression is emotionally crippling and has numerous medical implications -- some of them deadly -- many men fail to recognize the symptoms. Instead of talking about their feelings, men may mask them with alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, anger or by becoming workaholics. And even when they do realize they have a problem, men often view asking for help as an admission of weakness, a betrayal of their male identities.

The result is a hidden epidemic of despair that is destroying marriages, disrupting careers, filling jail cells, clogging emergency rooms and costing society billions of dollars in lost productivity and medical bills. It is also creating a cohort of children who carry the burden of their fathers' pain for the rest of their lives. "Our definition of a successful man in this culture does not include being depressed, down or sad," says Michael Addis, chair of psychology at Clark University in Massachusetts. "In many ways it's the exact opposite. A successful man is always up, positive, in charge and in control of his emotions."

Scelfo reports that some of the symptoms of depression are so severe, like gambling addiction or alcoholism, they are often mistaken for the problem. David Feherty, the CBS golf commentator and former golf pro, began drinking at such a young age it became part of his personality. "I drank a bottle of whisky in order to get ready to start drinking," he tells Newsweek. By his 40s, he routinely consumed two bottles of whisky a day, and was in such physical pain, he thought he suffered from "some kind of degenerative muscle disease." During that period, he maintained a jovial front, and kept up a steady stream of on-air wisecracks during golf tournaments. "It was a problem that just, I don't know, ate itself up and got bigger and bigger and then, one day, bang, I disappeared."

When he finally learned in 2005 that he suffered from depression, he felt a combination of shock and relief. "That was the most stunning thing. I just thought I was a lousy husband and miserable bastard and a drunk," says Feherty, now 48. "A mental illness? Me? I had no idea."

Scelfo reports that awareness of male depression is growing and the stigma surrounding it is beginning to lift. New tools for diagnosing the disease -- which ranges from the chronic inability to feel good, to major depression, to bipolar disorder -- and new approaches to treating it, offer hope for millions. And as scientists gain insight into how depression occurs in the brain, their findings are spurring research into an array of new treatments including faster-acting, more-effective drugs that could benefit those who struggle with what Winston Churchill called his "black dog."

And researchers are helping general practitioners, who are usually the first -- and often the only -- medical professional depressed men encounter, assess a patient's emotional state when they are unwilling (or unable) to talk about their feelings. They've developed a simple screening test for doctors to use: Over the last two weeks, have you been bothered by either of the following problems: (a) little interest or pleasure in doing things? or (b) feeling down, depressed or hopeless? If a patient responds "yes," seven more questions can be administered, which result in a 0 to 27 rating. Score in hand, many physicians feel more comfortable broaching the subject of depression, and men seem more willing to discuss it. "It's a way of making it more concrete," says Indiana University's Dr. Kurt Kroenke, who helped design the questionnaires. "Patients can see how severe their scores are, just like if you showed them blood-sugar or cholesterol levels."

Depression-screening tests are so effective at early detection and may prevent so many future problems (and expenses) that the U.S. Army is rolling out a new screening program for soldiers returning from Iraq. College health-center Web sites nationwide provide the service to their students, and even the San Francisco Giants offers these tests to its employees.