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HOW DO WE GET MEN TO ENGAGE WITH OUR WELLBEING INITIATIVES?

Andrew Pain



ABSTRACT

Addressing men's mental health and understanding how to engage men, starts with understanding that men's mental health is everyone's challenge: aside from the men themselves and the journey they've experienced to arrive at a place of homelessness, prison or suicide, there is also a ripple effect: broken families, traumatised work colleagues, fractured communities. The reasons why men don't engage in wellbeing initiatives at work will differ from organisation to organisation, but within our workplaces, there are concrete steps we can take to make a difference, to start the conversation around men's mental health and create healthier working environments for everyone.

Keywords: males, men, men's health, mental health, psychological safety

As a professional speaker and trainer, leading in my work on men's mental health, this is one of the most common questions I'm asked by the people I reach out to: **how do we get men to engage with our wellbeing initiatives?** Other questions include: why are men and boys struggling? How do we help them? How do we tackle 'toxic masculinity'?

The questions in themselves are not surprising and the UK statistics at least, speak for themselves:

- Over 80% of homeless people in the UK are men.
- 95% of people in prison in the UK are men.
- 3/4 of people who complete suicide each year in the UK, are men.

Addressing men's mental health and understanding how to engage men, starts with understanding that men's mental health is everyone's challenge: aside from the men themselves and the journey they've experienced to arrive at a place of homelessness, prison or suicide, there is also a ripple effect: broken families, traumatised work colleagues, fractured communities. It really does matter and once we fully take that on board, there are then three seriously important questions to ask:

1. **What are the barriers, prejudices, and stigmas within our society which might hold men back from opening-up in general?**
2. **What is the language we need to speak, in order to engage the people, we most need to engage?**
3. **How do we inspire men to be the best version of themselves?**

The reasons why men don't engage in wellbeing initiatives at work will differ from organisation to organisation, but within our workplaces, here are four concrete steps we can take to make a difference, to start the conversation around men's mental health and create healthier working environments for everyone.

1. **Create men's networks:** building formal or informal communities of men, where men can connect, develop relationships, talk in an open and safe setting. The network may simply offer a social vibe or there might be an additional purpose such as volunteering, or sport as part of the connecting. Increasingly, I speak to HR and L&D directors making

the point that there is a women's network with budget, but nothing for men and that needs to change.

2. **Use male-appropriate language and marketing for wellbeing initiatives:** where the title and description of the event makes it clear that it's focussed on men's mental health, and that within the session, we'll be discussing fatherhood, men and boys, and whether toxic masculinity as a phrase builds bridges or walls, the numbers of men attending has been encouraging and surprisingly good (surprising for the organisations who book me). It seems that men do talk and want to talk more, particularly if they can see that something is targeted for them in a positive way. (On a very positive note, when my men's mental health sessions are marketed internally to workforces there are also significant numbers of concerned women who want to attend)
3. **Ensure psychological safety:** where people are safe to be open, transparent, vulnerable, because they know that in doing so, they won't be belittled, gossiped about, patronised, ignored or penalised. Several times this year, I've heard the comment, 'men don't want to attend the wellbeing session because they fear that by attending, their boss will think they're struggling and this may affect how they think about him'. If that is the case, then definitely, we need psychological safety, where people are used to being vulnerable and open. Psychological safety is a trending buzzword in leadership and HR circles, but on an operational and day-to-day basis, do people really understand what it is and how to create it? In a recent webinar I delivered to 60 NHS middle managers, only one person could correctly define what psychological safety is; and on a recent webinar I delivered to 25 organisational development leads, no one could correctly define all 3 the following buzzwords: intersectionality, allyship and psychological safety. It's up to leadership to take the lead in creating awareness around these terms, in provoking discussion and understanding how to deliver on these buzzwords.
4. **Achieve quick-and-easy wins on a micro level:** for example, I recently met a team leader working in a male-majority, warehouse environment. He wanted to create a learning focussed and high-performing team, so as part of his strategy, he initiated fortnightly lunch meetings with his team, in order to eat together, watch a TED talk and discuss it. Sometimes the choice of TED talk was random and sometimes people made

requests for specific talks and topics, but over the months, these fortnightly meetings of ‘eat, watch and respectfully debate diverse issues’, created both a tolerant and learning focussed spirit in his team. No great expense was necessary, no massive launch, just a simple idea as an experiment and consistently delivered.

Creating active men’s networks, using male-appropriate language and marketing for wellbeing initiatives, ensuring psychological safety, and achieving quick-and-easy wins on a micro-level (and sharing the learning to spark other initiatives)—they’re not the full answer to a complex question of how to engage men, but they’re a good start!

AUTHOR PROFILE



Andrew Pain is a down-to-earth motivational speaker on a mission to create decisive and resilient communities, break down stigmas and stereotyping, and inspire gender unity. To this mission he contributes lived experience as a domestic abuse survivor, with 20 years of leadership and HR experience. Andrew combines energetic delivery and an engaging sense of humour to address serious topics related to mental health and wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, leadership and talent development.

Contact details: andrew@andrewpain.co.uk

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