

GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY

Foreword


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REAL MEN *DO* DO THERAPY

Are we really incapable of opening up and talking about our emotions? GQ challenges the outdated myths surrounding men's mental health and urges you to join the wellbeing revolution

STORY BY **Louise Chunn**

Why is it that when we think of men dealing with problems in their lives – crumbling relationships, lost jobs, mourning loved ones, coping with depression or anxiety – we think of booze, pills and doom-laden silence? Or, worst case scenario, even taking the ultimate exit strategy. Men are three times more likely to take their own lives than women, and young men are particularly at risk. Literature and cinema portray men deadening their pain, rather than seeking to find a way out of the dark corners. But that is beginning to change.

More men are choosing therapy as a way of dealing with their issues. According to the British Association For Counselling And Psychotherapy (BACP), the number of men seeking therapy has been increasing in the last decade. Andrew Reeves, chair of the 42,000-member organisation and himself a therapist with many male clients, says, "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."

But there are still many factors – real or imagined – that stand in the way. For one thing, you can't usually amble into your GP's surgery and walk out with a therapist appointment. Counselling is available on the NHS, but waiting lists are long and the duration and type of therapy is usually very limited, with the most practical style, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), being the overwhelming choice in public health. This means that many people may want therapy but feel they can't afford to pay the weekly consultation fees, which start at around £50 and can go as high as £150.

As the founder of welldoing.org, a site which helps match people looking for therapy with the therapists most suited to their needs, I've spoken to many men about therapy – and heard their reasoning about why it might not work for them. Here are a handful of common myths – you could call them excuses – about therapy and the reasons why you shouldn't let them put you off if you are considering doing it. As one of the men I interviewed said, "Therapy is the greatest gift you can give yourself – I think everybody should do it." ➤

1 You wouldn't know which therapist to choose

It's true, there are hundreds of different kinds of therapy. And like a good pair of shoes, you need to find the right therapy to fit you.

Broadly, there are those that explore your past as a means of understanding yourself (psychoanalysis and psychodynamic), and more practical, symptom-relief styles such as CBT. Spiritually tinged therapy styles are psychosynthesis and transpersonal; while body/mind styles include mindfulness. Integrative is a term used to describe mixing different styles, which is increasingly common.

Paul, a songwriter from Brighton, decided to seek therapy some years ago because his girlfriend was pregnant, "And I freaked out. For some reason I decided on a psychoanalyst. A really old-fashioned, bearded, Jewish, Hampstead analyst, and I did the whole thing – five days a week, though eventually we got it down to once a week. And actually, it was a marvellous experience. He became very important to me. I phoned him before I phoned my parents when my first child was born. His effect on my life is still with me many years later."

2 It's unmanly to seek help

Most people who have had therapy reject this kind of argument. As one male client wrote on welldoing.org: "That's caveman talk." Another told me, "There's that male pride thing; men can find it difficult to admit they have a problem. But I knew I had to get help if I was going to have a reasonable life. Therapy has changed me quite dramatically from someone who was very self-conscious, neurotic and unhappy to someone who is centred and calm. I've become a whole person. That's not unmanly."

Andrew Samuels, a north London psychotherapist with a mostly male clientele wrote about this on welldoing.org, suggesting that some men's reluctance to engage with therapy could be down to unprocessed homophobia. "Is taking the role of a therapy client not properly masculine, which means it's sort of 'gay'? Is identifying oneself as a client a self-castration, which is connected in the collective mind with a negative view of homosexuality?" This may be true, but there are still plenty of men – straight and gay – who choose to try therapy.

3 Men don't really want to talk about things

Yes, they do actually. But it's got to be with the right person. Research shows that the therapeutic alliance (the relationship between client and therapist) is the most important factor in the success of treatment. It's more important than the therapist's experience.

Not everyone will respond to therapy – whatever kind it is – but the same is true of taking drugs for depression and other mental health issues. You won't know if it's for you unless you try it, and you may be surprised at how effective it can be.

Barry, a TV producer from Bristol, initially did couples counselling with his then-wife. "I was very opposed to the idea of any type of therapy but went along because she wanted us to go. But once there I discovered that it was incredibly interesting and useful to me. After we had finished with that, and my marriage had ended, I tried several different people, but I kept remembering the original counsellor and how we had a great connection. I contacted her and she agreed to see me on my own. We ended up having weekly sessions for five years and it revealed so many things I hadn't known about myself.

"For example, she helped me see that I held a lot of anger towards my mother. Through therapy I gained a better understanding of where she was coming from, that she was a victim of time and circumstance.

'I could feel my brain rewiring. I was taking responsibility'

examples include Professor Green, Martin Kemp, Robert Peston, James Rhodes and Alex James.

The wife of a man who has seen various therapists laughed at the suggestion that family would be critical. "It's actually a huge relief. He would talk to me, but there was only so much we could deal with, as part of his problem was the overwhelming guilt he felt about having an affair. My husband didn't like therapy – he couldn't wait to finish it. After about two months I could see that he was in much better shape after it and he acknowledged that."

Some clients love the process so much they become proselytisers for the practice. Barry was offered a promotion but told his boss that he wouldn't take it if it would have stopped him going to therapy every Wednesday. "I took a gamble that he wouldn't think I was crazy – I said, 'I want this job, but I'm not going to give up my therapy sessions.' And the boss told me if it helps me do the job, then it's good in his mind."

5 If you see a female therapist, you may want to have sex with her

You've seen *The Sopranos* and the sizzle of sexual tension between Tony Soprano and his shrink, Dr Melfi. According to Hud, a writer from northwest London, there's always an issue of sex if your therapist is female. "I felt attracted to the first woman I saw – she was very good looking with incredibly long legs and she'd wear these really short skirts."

But that doesn't have to mean you can't continue to see her. According to one female therapist I spoke to, all clients – male and female – flirt with their therapists. Hud told his therapist that he was finding her wardrobe sexually distracting. "She seemed slightly shocked, but I felt it was better to be honest. Discussing it is a bit uncomfortable but it dissipates the energy if you do."

Several men said that male therapists tended to be more practical – though that does depend on their training. There are many more female therapists than male, so chances are you may end up seeing a female therapist. But it's just as likely you'll see your therapist as a maternal figure, so choose accordingly.

6 Having therapy won't make any difference

Yes, it will. Not every session, and not every therapist, but in the right situation it can make a huge difference. For Barry, "It was life-changing. It gave me a much greater sense of awareness of other people, and it taught me to be more empathic. I was quite a selfish person beforehand, I didn't really think about other people's emotions or how I could impact them. If someone was upset, I'd immediately be defensive.

"At times, I could feel my brain rewiring. Instead of going from stimulus to response I learned to create a gap where I was taking responsibility for my reactions and emotions. Just because someone feels that way doesn't mean it's an attack on you, and acknowledging someone's feelings is not the same as admitting blame. These are quite adult skills – and I lacked them completely before I started therapy."

Louise Chunn is the founder of welldoing.org, a directory that can find the right therapist for you. 