

# LET'S TALK ABOUT *MEN'S HEALTH*

PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS LOOKING AFTER YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH, SAYS DR KIERAN KENNEDY.

**D**r Kieran Kennedy is a medical doctor and psychiatry registrar who thinks we should be having more conversations about men's mental health. While the coronavirus pandemic has impacted almost all Aussies in different ways, he thinks many men are still reluctant to speak up about the pressures they're experiencing. Here, he explains how men can become more aware of emotional changes, plus what they can do about it.

## KNOW THE SIGNS

"Everyone knows what a tummy ache, a muscle strain or a headache feels like, but a lot of men can grow up without acknowledging changes in their mental health. When going through the significant changes and stresses that the pandemic has thrown at us, some common

responses are things like your sleep being off, feeling that your mood is a bit more up and down than usual, or feeling more unmotivated or apathetic.

"When it comes to anxiety, a lot of people feel something is going on, but they don't actually connect to it being anxiety. There's a mental or psychological component to anxiety – you might feel you're not able to concentrate as well as you normally would, or your memory might be worse. You might also feel kind of tense and panicked, or worried.

"There's a physical aspect to anxiety as well: a racing heart, shallow breathing, feeling tense or sweaty, or just feeling a kind of uneasy churning in your stomach. Keeping a check of what your body is doing can actually be a good way, particularly for men, to monitor how things are going for their mind as well." >



**Dr Kieran Kennedy**



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### **SPEAK KINDLY TO YOURSELF**

“There’s nothing inherent about men or masculinity that says we don’t experience mental health struggles, or that we’re not as good at talking about it. If you’re a man who’s struggling with or experiencing anxiety, it doesn’t make you any less of a man – this

is something that all men go through in some way. So it’s about men being gentle with themselves and saying, ‘hey, I’m feeling these things and that’s okay. And it’s okay for me to take some steps to support myself and my mental health, just as I would with my fitness or physical health’.”

### **GET PROACTIVE**

“Sleep can go a long way to boosting your mental resilience, reducing anxiety and improving your mood. Try to get around seven to eight hours of sleep a night, go to bed at a routine time and avoid screens for an hour before bed. We also know that physical activity and exercise can significantly improve depression and anxiety, so doing some kind of daily activity is good. Adding mindfulness or meditation to your day can also be very protective for your mental health. Using apps like Headspace or Calm are really helpful for that.

“Finally, social contact is key at the moment, even if it’s over Zoom or on the phone. I’ve been encouraging people to set an alarm for it on their phone, so at 4pm every day you text a mate that you haven’t texted in a while, or you organise a Zoom call with your family. When you’re feeling under the pump because of everything that’s going on, actually getting proactive about scheduling some of these things is really important.”

### **PROTECT YOUR ROUTINE**

“Having a routine and structure is important, particularly if you’re working from home or have experienced changes in your work or family life. Try to stick to a morning routine as if you were going to work. Separating out different spaces in the house can also help – even if it’s just a corner of the house that is for work, the couch for relaxing, and the bedroom for sleep.

“This helps to stop things feeling so out of control because of all that’s going on in the world.” >





### EXERCISE SAFELY

“Any kind of physical activity is going to help not just your body, but your brain as well. But the pandemic has been tough because many of the things we’d usually use to release stress and reduce tension are changing or have even gone. If your gym is closed or you can’t get to in-person personal training, try to switch up your exercise instead of cancelling it. So that might be walking or running more outside. It might be a solo workout outside. Lots of people are getting into online workouts with personal trainers, or accessing YouTube videos for yoga exercises.

“We know that physical exercise can significantly improve anxiety and depression, particularly mild anxiety and depression. The really interesting thing about the connection between exercise and mental health is that we know it doesn’t have to be a gym workout. It doesn’t have to be a massive weights session, or a 90-minute slog fest. Exercising for as little as 30 minutes just three to four times a week can actually have significant benefits for our mental health.”

### SEE YOUR GP

“I’m often asked about the difference between a ‘normal’ reaction to everything that’s going on with the pandemic, and mental illness. It’s a tricky one because everyone’s different, but if things are lasting for longer than a few weeks and not getting any better, that can be a key sign that you might need help. If things are feeling significantly tough to the point where you’re not able to enjoy the activities you normally would, or go to work, that’s a sign that it might be something more serious.

“This is the time to reach out, to talk with your GP about it. Your arm doesn’t actually have to be falling off for you to say, ‘I should probably ask a doctor about that’. And the same goes for your mental health, especially at the moment, with all the strains and pressures. If you’re asking yourself, ‘am I okay?’, that is the point where you should be reaching out and talking to a GP. Depression and anxiety are some of the most common conditions that people see a GP for, so people should feel very comfortable talking to their doctor about this.”

### TALK IT OVER

If you have a mate who seems to be struggling, it can be tricky to know how to broach the topic. Dr Kennedy has these tips for starting the conversation.

#### Sit side-by-side

“There’s some really interesting research that shows men find it easier to talk about emotional things when they’re sitting side-by-side compared to face-to-face. Beyond Blue has this really awesome thing called a Chat Lap where they acknowledge that talking about this kind of stuff can be easier when you’re both in the car together and you’re driving side-by-side.”

#### Get busy

“It can be easier to talk about confronting things if we have something to do at the same time. For example, you could talk while going for a jog with a friend, or maybe while you’re doing the dishes with your partner, or doing a chore in the garden. Having an activity or distraction can just make it feel less in-your-face.”

#### Don’t ignore it

“Asking your friend how they’re going is important because that significantly reduces the risk of things getting worse. We know that if you’re struggling with your mood or anxiety, just talking to someone about it can really improve those symptoms, so that’s why it’s so important for men to let some of this stuff out and open up about it.” 