

20 November 2025

Q&A: Unpacking men's suicidality following relationship breakdown

In this short Q&A, Michael Wilson discusses why separation is a particularly vulnerable period for men, the psychological and social factors that heighten risk, and how services and communities can provide more effective support during this time.

Transcript

Introduction

My name is Michael Wilson, I'm a research fellow with Orygen, which is the Centre for Youth Mental Health at the University of Melbourne and my research has focused on men's risk of suicide in the context of relationship breakdown. So excited to talk about that today.

Before I do, I'd just like to acknowledge that I'm dialling in from the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and just pay my respects to the elders, past and present, and extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander folks watching today.

What motivated you to focus on men and relationship breakdowns?

So, I had been working in the field of men's mental health more generally for quite a few years, and I just found that any time we did research looking at men's mental health and suicide risk in particular, relationship breakdown and relationship problems, generally, just always came up as a really common risk factor particularly for suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

And in looking into it I sort of realised that very little research had been done that was focused on trying to understand what's going on for men here and what men's risk kind of looks like. Most of the existing research had compared men to women, which tends to just homogenise all diversity and difference within and between men, and indeed within and between women.

And it's not really all that useful in terms of understanding which men are most at risk and what factors actually play a role in their risk of suicide following relationship breakdown. So that was sort of the academic aim but also I have my own personal experience, particularly supporting friends through really difficult relationship breakdowns. And I just really feel the pain of not necessarily knowing how best to support the person that's going through that.

And so, it was my hope that in sort of focusing on this topic it could shine a bit more of a light on what can be done better to best support men, but realistically best support anyone through something as difficult as a breakup.

The study found that risk is greatest in the immediate aftermath of separation. What makes this period particularly risky for men?

So, I think the first thing that's important to note is that relationship breakdown is a risk factor regardless of gender. There is often some misconceptions out there that it's much more risky for men than women but it's actually not the case, it's a risk factor, you know, regardless of gender. But I suppose where the gender differences kind of come up is in the factors involved in that risk and in why relationship breakdown can lead to suicide for men relative to women.

And so, yes, we know that the acute aftermath of relationship breakdown is a particularly risky period. We found in the review that separated men are up to five times more likely to die by suicide than married men, which I think really speaks to the acute aftermath of relationship breakdown being closer to the core event of the breakdown and the sort of dissolution of that relationship. And so, I think tied to that, is a lot of the inherent kind of emotional upheaval and the sort of dysregulation that a lot of men can experience in at that time. We know that the emotional impacts really peak in the acute aftermath and dissipate with time, but absent kind of adaptive, healthy coping strategies, it can sort of exacerbate the emotional pain and lead to increased risk of suicide.

We also know the acute aftermath of relationship breakdown is linked to a really peaking sense of disconnection and isolation, especially when we consider that our intimate relationships are often a primary source of connection and sort of feeling tethered to other people and to the world around us. And so, it can be really common to feel that you know that everything has come crashing down in the event of a breakup and that can be especially risky, I think, for men who maybe have relied on their partner as a primary source of social and emotional support, such that they may have little, you know, avenues of support outside of that relationship.

So, there's a lot that goes on here, and there's obviously a range of other factors involved as well. But from our review, these emotional and interpersonal impacts of the relationship breakdown seem to really peak in the acute aftermath and it all kind of coalesces to increase risk of suicide.

How can services and communities better respond to men's needs?

Yeah, it's a really important question and we know that there are identity sort of impacts of relationship breakdown being that it can lead to a sort of rupture of the sense of identity that some men have, especially if they derive a key sense of this, you know, sense of self-worth as a man and their sense of masculinity from their relationship and maybe their role as a father or provider or a family man, those sorts of things.

So, I think it's really important to consider the identity impacts of relationship breakdown and how we can best support men's sort of adjustment to that. And I think the main way that communities in particular can do better to support that is to not somehow expect men to be emotionally immune to the impacts of relationship breakdown.

I think on the point of masculinity, there's a really common masculine norm that I think is inadvertently reinforced by people supporting men, whereby, you know, the recommendation to often encourage men just to get back out there, get back on the horse, just re-partner as quickly as possible — it might feel like the right thing to say but it really serves only to reinforce this unrealistic standard of masculinity where men are somehow emotionally immune to relationship breakdown and can and should just get over it and move on as quickly as possible.

How can frontline organisations support men going through a breakup?

So, also really important, because we know that relationship breakdown can be a common trigger for help seeking in men, especially for mental health services, friends and family — so both formal and informal supports. And so, the first thing that I think is really important is encouraging healthy emotion regulation and distress tolerance skills. We know that in terms of our culture of masculinity, a lot of men are still raised not necessarily learning the skills of how to effectively regulate emotions in the context of really significant distress.

So, healthy emotional regulation and sort of distress tolerance skills are critical. And I think especially targeting shame as a really common emotion that can come up in the context of relationship breakdown. We know, you know, there were some studies in the review that looked at shame as a kind of mediating factor in the link between relationship breakdown and suicidality.

So, it does play a role and again links back to the identity impacts of relationship breakdown where some men can feel shame, you know, due to their loss of their role as a father, potentially, or also maybe in circumstances where they've done some things that, you know, are potentially not okay or that they regress in the context of relationship breakdowns — that can lead to shame.

Also, seeking help at all can lead to a sense of shame for some men to the extent that it violates norms of self-reliance and sort of restricted emotionality grounded in masculinity. And so I think for frontline practitioners supporting men, I think really trying to screen for shame and help men sort of regulate that and respond to it by reinforcing their sense of identity and their sense of who they are independent of that relationship can be really critical to, I guess, targeting the feelings of shame that we know to be linked with risk of suicide.

The review covered data from 30 countries. Were there any patterns or cultural differences that really stood out to you?

So, it was the biggest review that had ever been done on the subject. So, we analysed data from over 30 countries worldwide, and the total sample that we analysed included over 106 million men worldwide. So, it was a really, really big study. And yeah, we were able to group together the different studies that had results from Asian relative to Western cultures. And so, it didn't seem that was the case that the disparity in risk of suicide between divorced and married men was greater where studies were conducted in Asian cultures relative to Western cultures.

And so, particularly the Asian cultures that we had data from were South Korea, China and Japan. And so, it seems that divorced men there are at greater risk of suicide following relationship breakdown relative to men in Western cultures — being Scandinavia, the UK, Australia, USA and some parts of Europe. And so whilst we didn't have the kind of granularity needed to really dig into this, I think what it might suggest is that there could be a greater prominence of marriage as kind of a foundation of social cohesion in collectivist cultures, relative to more individualist cultures in the West, where that might lead, for example, to a greater sense of shame or, you know, a greater sense of sort of catastrophic loss in the event of relationship breakdown for some men in Asian cultures. But again, I'm just speculating here. We need to kind of delve into that more. But that may be one explanation for what we found.

What are the protective factors that can guide prevention efforts?

So, as I said earlier, I think relationship breakdown is a really, I guess, it can be considered a crisis of connection in that when we lose our intimate relationship, we lose not only the partner but the sense of connection that sort of flows out in multi layers from that, because we know that having an intimate partner is linked to having more sort of social connections generally.

Also, a sense of belonging and community and things like that. So, there can be sort of flow-on effects of disconnection that can come post-breakup. And so I think to target that, what we know is protective is really any

sort of connection that people can hold on to — is the key antidote to that disconnection that they feel, and also is a key antidote to the shame that is so often prominent post-breakup.

And so, even if, you know, it can feel like there is no one to turn to and there is no avenue of support, even maintaining a connection to yourself and who you are independent of your relationship, I think, can be really protective because, again, it can help combat the sort of sense that you are nothing without your relationship, which is just — it's not the case.

But, you know, in the acute aftermath of a relationship breakdown, I think it's really hard to combat those really catastrophic feelings. And so, yes, generally, in any sense of the word, maintaining any sort of connection, both to other people or to oneself independent of the relationship, is really critical in maintaining a sense of purpose, self and identity at a time when all of that can sort of come crashing down.

What gives you hope about the direction of men's mental health and suicide prevention work?

Yeah, it's a great question. I think we do need hope working in this space, so it is really important. And I think what gives me hope is that I think there's a real appetite for change here, particularly with regard to a greater focus on relationship problems as a really key risk factor for suicide.

We know that men, you know, in really significant distress, are sort of open to any avenue of support. I think the myth that men don't seek help is just not ringing true anymore, especially in the context of a breakup — men calling out for support, people supporting men are calling out for support, as well as a real appetite for more, you know, training, skills development, everything like that.

On how to best support men through really difficult times. And so, I think the men in distress and any support the people around them are needing support — it's like everyone's calling out for it. So, it's a really opportune time to, I guess, take action and make a change.

And so, I think what also kind of gives me hope is that whilst breakups can be a really, sort of period of acute risk, as I've spoken about, they can also be a real opportunity because we know that there's a range of different positive outcomes that can come in the sort of longer-term post-breakup, especially if, you know, you can develop a sense of learning and resilience and growth following the really significant emotional pain that you can experience. And so, I think especially for a lot of the men I've spoken to, the pain of the acute aftermath is often the beginning of a kind of steep upward trajectory in positive growth and self-development, especially for young men. And so, I think we just have to make sure that suicide doesn't cut short that path and that positive trajectory of growth, because it can lead to really transformative, in a sense, post-traumatic growth for a lot of people. So, a lot of things give me hope.



James Fletcher Campus
72 Watt Street (PO Box 833)
Newcastle NSW 2300

02 4924 6900
everymind@health.nsw.gov.au
everymind.org.au

 @EverymindAU

