

Being a Man in Rural Ireland : Resources for Maintaining Mental Health & Well-being

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Aim

The aim is to explore and identify factors that impede Irish rural men in the west Sligo area of Ireland aged between 25-55 from attending counselling and what other cultural resources they might employ as an alternative.

Methodology

The research was conducted using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (I.P.A..) 6 Participants (Men) were recruited through friendships firstly and subsequently through a 'Snowballing' method aged 25-55 years living in the County of Sligo, to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting 45-90min.

Researcher

Allen Gilhooly is a Full time Psychotherapist & Mental Health Consultant in rural N.W. Ireland Over the course of 6 years on moving from Dublin to Sligo, one cohort of clients became of interest. These were rural men aged between 25-55 years. He had quickly become aware that quite a large portion of his client base were male. Most men presented via referral, few had self-referred. Most had a family member, partner or wife ring on their behalf. Most cited that it was under duress that they attended. Most stated that they first thought about counselling as far back as 3 years before mobilising. What then, had they been using to get by till then?

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Key Findings

It's Hard to talk about 'it' - Mental Difficulties & Wellness - Difficult to talk about the intangible.

Everyday relationships, practices and rituals in the home / community that people are often engaged in offer support, are helpful in resilience building and mentally health sustaining. Some are explicit / implicit

Being a single male in rural Ireland is not easy.

Tackling men's health difficulties needs to include family in particular wives and partners.

Emerging Themes

Two major themes came from the study. The first centred on *Ambiguity & Hidden Resources*.

Most participants found talking about Mental Health to be difficult whether it was not common in their experience to talk about Mental health or putting a language to the experience itself. All agreed that having a relationship was key but one needed to have a 'good sense of self' in order to be able to find a partner. Most were married but understood the difficulties of being single in a rural Ireland which they all had some experience of. Fewer opportunities are available when single often leading to poor physical/mental health.

Most indicated that making time was important to look after self however life events could get in the way which caused a barrier to cultural resources.

Emerging from the interviews it was noticed that these men often used cultural and inner resources as help seeking behaviours in times of difficulty. Of particular interest was the lack of awareness they had of these behaviours until they reflected upon them in the interview. All 6 interviewed were asked for a personal philosophy in connection to their understanding of being a man as one of the interview questions. The results proved to be surprise even the participants at

how deep they felt their meanings were.

The next major theme was *Relationships* (Wives in particular) 5 of the 6 were married with children. One had not given any information about his relationship status. It was clear from the 5 men who were married that being in a relationship brought benefits that far outweighed being single. Wives/partners were described as 'best friends' or 'team-mates' who didn't judge them and this allowed for a deeper dialogue than would be present amongst friends. Friend relationships were not as important as their wives with particular regard to not engaging in a deep dialogue with friends.

Family was also seen as important where free time was seen best spent with their children whom also stood out due to 5 of the men not having had a strong fatherly presence when growing up. Being part of a community was seen as important but gaining access to the community was easy to do if one had children or had a role such as a coach which gave permission to work with children. Community was described as still being traditional in their perceptions and values, even though the men acknowledged that their own communities were multicultural and diverse.

Discussion

The findings represent an existential difficulty which exists for men in rural Ireland. It may very well be that by trying to understand these experiences of Mental health in our communities we could get distracted by strategies and language and miss the opportunities of resources already present in the experiences of men in the community.

Many resources are deeply embedded within tradition and ritual which often is undervalued or underestimated.

The study also has implications for the ways in which we understand the nature of therapy integration. The implication of this study is that effective change happens within everyday living of the client and those clients' strengths and cultural resources are essential in clients to bring about change in their own lives.

"...the process of talking to clients about what they want from therapy, and how they think they may be most likely to achieve it."

Cooper and McLeod (2012) *Pluralistic Counselling & Psychotherapy*. Sage (p.7)