

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Welcome back to the science of work, where I, Dr. Lisa Belanger, take a deep dive into the habits, skills, work design, and leadership behind global trends in today's workforce. With more women entering the workforce over the last 30 years, the percentage of working population around the world of men and has gone from about 80% to about 70%. Right now or the latest data, which is about 2019, Europe is seen around 60% males in the workforce. And the US is seen about 69%. So, when we're designing workplace mental health programs, there's no denying, we need to take into account gender differences when it comes to males. In today's episode, we're talking about men's mental health and how it can relate to work. While there's been an increasing discussion, understanding access to services and decrease of stigma on mental health, we have a long way to go. And particularly when it comes to men's mental health.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

There are some clear gender based patterns in mental health that we need to take into consideration as leaders. How we show up support, create vocabulary around policy development and for ourselves and the men in our lives. Today, we're speaking with Jake, Stika, the Executive Director for Next Gen Men, which is a nonprofit, focused on gender based issues related to the social and emotional development of young men, the health and wellbeing of men in our communities and gender equity in workplaces for the future where boys and men experience less pain and cause less harm. I've been privy to Jake's work over the last several years and I cannot say enough good things about him and about the work that he has done. So, let's dive in.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

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Dr. Lisa Belanger:

As Jake will reiterate in his interview, it is important to note for this conversation that we are generalizing based on trends, of course, there's extensive individual differences on knowledge, access to service, comfort, support, upbringing and the list goes on. The conversation is not men's mental health instead of it is, and. And it is not precluding the incredible importance of women's mental health trends and non-binary pupils. It's just looking at what the differences are that we're seeing in men and how it relates to work. As we look at trends, the one that comes up often and is undeniable is suicide rates are approximately three times higher in men compared to women. In the US, it's 3.45 times.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

In US, depression and suicide are amongst the leading cause of death in men. In 2012, Canadian Community Health Survey, mental health, indicates that Canadian men are both three times more likely to experience addiction and substance abuse compared to Canadian women and interesting, men report loneliness much more often than women. In an Angus Reid surveys, 63% of 18 to 34 year old men experience considerable loneliness and isolation compared to 53% of similar aged women. Females are 2.7 times more likely to utilize mental health services than men. I remember being at a conference and I've talked about this before, where the speaker was an ER physician speaking at an oil and gas company. The audience was mostly men, mostly engineers. He got more people to admit that they've

soiled their pants in public than had mental health distress. Something that every single human being experiences.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

We have a problem. In 2021, a book about men's mental health by Whitley, there is a few things that arise. Depression, substance abuse and suicide are more significant in men. Unemployment or precarious employment in job stress and strain are risk factors for depression, substance abuse, and suicide more in men. Proposed reasons why these are risk factors more in men than women is men typically remain breadwinners. Thus, unemployment has a serious consequence to their standard of living. Men tend to work longer, unsociable hours and thus absent from relationships such as family and friends. Men tend to work more dangerous and risky occupation, thus more exposure to hazardous, psychological or physical workplace that creates stress. Men draw considerable purpose, meaning and positive identity from their role as breadwinner and/or productive worker. Again, generalized statements, but something to think about.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Successful interventions at work for men's mental health to try to increase their uptake or their access, have included things like apps, workshops, gamification, group discussions, cognitive behavior therapy that uses different things like sports or drumming. So, we really have to consider or reimagine what we offer at work to suit men, meeting them where they're at. So, why do we need to talk more about men's mental health?

Jake Stika:

I would say because men are in a form of crisis and it's a unspoken crisis in many ways, because they're not going to tell you how they're feeling. They're not going to tell you how they're doing, but we see it play out in the fact that men are three out of four suicides. Men are 80 plus percent of drug poisonings. They have higher rates of substance abuse, homelessness, and those are the extreme outcomes of the issue that we're talking about here. But from that extreme to every day, "I'm doing good. I'm thriving.", there's a whole range that really we don't really talk about or look at. I think that sometimes these conversations, especially when we get to gender or race or other identity pieces, it can feel like a no but conversation, right? We care about women's mental health. Well, no, but we should care about men's. To me, it's always a yes and conversation, right?

Jake Stika:

The fact that men are experiencing these things is not greater or a substitute than people of other genders experiencing their own mental health struggles because we know women are more likely to actually attempt suicide, but choose less lethal means. So, they have a much higher survival rate not to even get started with rates of self harm and suicidal ideation, et cetera, within trans and non-binary individuals. So, it's more like, let's also give this a look.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

What are we seeing generally for trends in mental health? And I'm thinking long term, but also in the last couple of years, given the changes of the pandemic.

Jake Stika:

We're looking a lot at the different types of industries that have been impacted through this pandemic as well, too, right? We obviously know healthcare is deeply impacted and among nurses, that's a female dominant space, doctors, there's more gender equity there. But truck drivers, they're essential workers. And the vast majority, we're talking 90 plus percent are male identified. And these are individuals who are having to cross borders, stay away from their family, make sure that these supply chains are good. And we're not even really talking about that population and what they're going through. So, it's kind of making that invisible piece visible.

Jake Stika:

Further to that, women are well versed in this idea of having to be the Pinterest worthy mother, as well as, climbing the corporate ladder and striving in that sense. And the reality is they've been struggling for a long period around this, whereas men for a long time, we're solely responsible for the breadwinning, that's starting to shift, but now they're also being invited, but also through a pandemic force to take on more childcare responsibilities, especially when the kids are safe at home with them during this time as well too.

Jake Stika:

And so, that same struggle that women had of the parenting and career, the men are being pushed into that as well. And they have so few role models or experience with this, right? Our fathers didn't experience that, our grandfathers definitely didn't experience that. Those are some of the big questions I think that are happening these days.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Obviously with everything we're talking about, we're generalizing, there's men that have been equal plus parents this whole time. But we are seeing that shift of being forced, invited into let's say parenting or further into roles within the household. And I really like your point about not having that model necessarily to lean back on, but I would argue it's that and experience and emotional intelligence and all these things that they haven't been rewarded for, essentially. It seems like there's been a massive gap on the skills that we push and reward for men.

Jake Stika:

Absolutely. And you make a great point about even just how men are socialized to talk and think about these kinds of things. Right? So you have a newborn at home and you're doing sleep training, you're not sleeping through the night. Women and mothers will have a whole [inaudible 00:09:49] of other women to talk to about that experience, whereas men often don't even have their peers to talk to about those kinds of things. I'm lucky that I'm of a generation that many men in and around my age are taking paternity leave and that's starting to shift and transform, but we know in a lot of spaces that that's not necessarily the case either. So, there's that. Who are emotional outlets and then how do we talk about it? Are men socialized to be like, "This is F-ing hard. I don't know how I'm going to get through this. I'm worried about X, Y, Z." No, we're socialized in a culture of competition and domination of hustle of, you just got to do it and you got to throw that extra weight on your shoulder [inaudible 00:10:32].

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

There's so much where in a heterosexual dyadic relationship that the main emotional support for the male is the female, because they are socialized in the way you're talking about, which becomes incredibly difficult. And they might just not have that outlet during the pandemic because of everything

else going on and much less of and I'm speaking completely anecdotally, but of a lot of the informal conversations that happen over beer or while watching sport, or that comes together, that they're consciously created, "I'm not going to call my guy friend and talk about X, Y, Z." Right? So, there's a huge shift that we might have been slightly aware of, but not in the same extent as what has happened over the pandemic. So, how does this impact work? So, if we're seeing a deterioration in some way, shape or form of men's mental wellbeing, arguably everybody's mental wellbeing, but in men, how does this translate into the work environment?

Jake Stika:

Well, we see that when men feel threatened in the workplace, that they often overcompensate and that can be in different facets of their life, but they'll rarely ever tell you, "Help, I'm struggling." They're going to talk about their achievements in the past. They're going to put more pressure on other people around them to perform, to potentially make up for some of those kinds of things. So, you're not necessarily going to get them to just come up and, and ask for that help that they desperately need. So, there's going to be different kinds of signals.

Jake Stika:

And then on the flip side of that, we're talking about this great resignation and all these kinds of things. Now, the reality is that, we can make assumptions about why things are changing, but oftentimes even in exit interviews, men don't say these kinds of things. Like many men leave companies because of the culture in that company, or because they weren't afforded paternal leave or something like that. But they just don't talk about those things in the exit interview, whereas women often do. I think that in the workplace when we're seeing some of these outcomes, if you're not really pointedly asking the questions or looking for those answers, you're actually really blind to a lot of those outcomes.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

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Dr. Lisa Belanger:

And I think that this is something that as we talk about great resignation, it's a time to consider to step back and be like, "Do we have parental leave? Are we supporting it? Are we encouraging it? Are there models that have taken it before?" I work with physicians who should in theory, be very much partial to understanding the bonds within children and parents and the mother took maternity leave and then the father was taking paternity leave. And in email correspondence, they referred to it as vacation. You need your team support to be able to take this much vacation and even small things like that, make somebody feel included or not, valued or not.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Denton is a great example. They just extended maternity or paternity leave to 26 paid weeks. I'm sure this is a part of a greater strategy to recruit and to incentivize people for staying as is that blatant understanding of how cultural shift is happening and work has to deal with little bit better to catch up on some of these nuances.

Jake Stika:

Well, that's exactly it. On the one hand, there's the great resignation and the talent exodus from our organizations. But looking forward to the future of work, what is the talent that we need to get to the goals that we want and how are we going to secure that talent, right? People who are leaving are not leaving necessarily for a specific reason, but a suite of reasons. And someone else has changed their perks, their benefits, their outcomes. And that's why they're leaving you for another organization. And so, similarly you have to be thinking about what is that competitive advantage moving forward. And so much of that has to do with the recalculation of where we work, how we work, what we work on. It's a big reckoning. And I think as organizations, we need to think about that. And we need to think about that through a gendered lens often.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Thank you [inaudible 00:15:09] through a gendered lens. What are things that leaders or companies can really do to support men's mental health? Now, obviously there's going to be things we can do to support everybody's mental health. But if we do think of it through a gendered lens, what are those opportunities?

Jake Stika:

Oftentimes it starts from the top. One of the number one leadership capabilities moving forward from here on out is emotional intelligence. And if in many organizations, the leadership is still top heavy leaning towards men, then those men need to step into those emotionally intelligent roles and role model that for the organization, because until you see it, you can't necessarily be it. So, if you have men in leadership taking parental leave, if you have men in leadership saying, "Hey, I'm taking a mental health day, I just can't bear the idea of six meetings and four deliverables today." That's going to give permission to other people to do it. So, I think leadership is really key to it, to your earlier point. I think revisiting our policies and procedures to make them gender neutral, but also in a way that is explicit in supporting people across that goes a really long way as well.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Is there anything we can be doing? I'm thinking leaders of small teams, like through our day to day work on how we interact and how we support men in the workplace.

Jake Stika:

Something that I do with my small team, we're a team of six. Every week, at the end of the week, we have a check-in. Something that went well, something that was a challenge, something we're looking forward to and giving recognition to other people. And I think that that is a great culture piece within our organization and myself as the executive director and leader, I'm telling them my struggles every week. Not every week is great deliverables. There's stock price that, these kinds of things. Every week, there's something that we're struggling against and just showing that and making that visible goes a long way.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

And it creates a conversation, normalizes approach. But I think it's really important to think through what we're modeling as leaders, what we're encouraging, what we're rewarding and being able to support both genders on that. But, then I think there's a level of just complexity of supporting humans.

So, being able to provide educational material in audio only, so they can go walk and listen versus presentations in the traditional format, being a little bit more creative with how we're getting the information to individuals, can go a long way in actually having that resonate. And I think there's a little bit of mentoring that can happen too. You talked about generational differences. So, for men or leaders that don't have the vocabulary, can we start integrating that? Can we start having some of these conversations and demonstrating modeling from a different perspective to be able to do that?

Jake Stika:

I love what you said there, especially around creating ways. People can show up, people want to show up, people want to contribute. And if we're too monolithic with, "This is the way we've always done it, therefore that's how it's always going to be done." they're not necessarily going to be able to do that. And that comes from how we have meetings? We started this off just quickly catching up and I'm talking about how I have a little bit of back pain right now and I need to either be standing up or laying down. But if, "All we offer is sitting down, that means that I can't participate." And I'm generally able bodied person. Then we're thinking about folks with disabilities and around that.

Jake Stika:

So, really asking people, what is it that you need to be able to show up as best as you can and accommodating for that, regardless of gender, regardless of ability, all those kind kinds of things really makes the workplace somewhere people want to go. It gives them meaning, it gives them purpose. It gives them income. And when you have that together, you're going to achieve a lot of great things.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

That's a very similar question. I think I've talked about it on mental health episode, on a neurodiversity at work episode, what do you need to do to perform at your best? And ask openly, honest, have that conversation and see what you're able to adjust. Obviously there's some things in work that have to be the way they are, because those are work hours and you need to meet or whatever it is, but those things you can accommodate. Why not accommodate for that. And then being able to, as leaders, educate yourself much as you can on the neurodiversity at work and what different people need. And we have this preconceived notion that people are depressed, won't be productive. That's not true at all. But they might need certain accommodations. And so, being able to create more of an open conversation can do so much to preventing stress leave that doesn't serve anybody to the different ramifications of this.

Jake Stika:

If we take the analogy of a rubber band and people's limits, if we're constantly operating people to the maximum extension and then something like a pandemic happens or a new deliverable comes on their plate, we snap. So, the resilience within an elastic band, just like in people, is a little bit of slack. So, how can we give them a little bit of slack, so that they can be resilient and meet the demands as they come.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

And, certainly as we get everything thrown off, I think we do this really bad idea that there's a work person and then there's a home person. Well no, everything from work comes home and vice versa. So, being able to accommodate to your point slack or the ability to do so, and being able to really work as a team versus a bunch of individuals. That's why we do it. What we're supposed to be doing is, to be able to balance those loads and being able to do that effectively, productively.

Jake Stika:

Absolutely. And especially during these "unprecedented times" when we're living at work.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

There's a concern that I address often around health, where a lot of the recommendations made for drugs or therapies, products are based on research about men. Women are not taken into account as part of the samples that our research, which just seems ridiculous. And yet, we generalize these recommendations to both genders. I'd say the reverse of mental health, if we know it's not being utilized by men, why would we not change our suggestions, our support and our services, so that it is. Can we be creative at work with what we offer for mental wellbeing to address this as best as we can.

Dr. Lisa Belanger:

Thank you so much for listening to today's episode of The Science of Work. A special thank you to Jake Stika for our conversation on this topic and for my team behind the scenes who make this podcast possible. For full transcripts and several further resources to men's mental health, please visit consciousworks.com. Remember, consciously design your day or somebody else will.