

Men's Mental Health Month: Rethinking Strength

By **Ken Bielecki**
JFCS Executive Director

June is Men's Mental Health Month, and it offers a meaningful opportunity to ask a simple but important question: Why is it still so difficult for many men to ask for help? In my years of practice, I've often thought about the difference between a single pillar and a bridge. A pillar stands alone, bearing weight in isolation until it eventually cracks under the pressure. A bridge, however, relies on connected segments tied together to span distances and carry heavy loads. For many men, we are taught to be pillars. But true resilience, the kind that lasts a lifetime, is built like a bridge: it requires human connection.

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Annaleise Fisher joins JFCS

Her identity as a counselor has been a driving force throughout her career and continues to shape her professional goals, says Annaleise Fisher, the newest counselor to join Jewish Family & Community Services. Fisher's primary responsibility at JFCS is to provide individual counseling services to people from all backgrounds, identities, and life experiences. Counseling is available for individuals experiencing concerns such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, relationship challenges, life transitions, and adjustment difficulties.

"My goal is to help clients gain insight, better understand and manage emotions, develop effective coping strategies, strengthen communication and boundary-setting skills, and prioritize self-care," she said.

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Our Gang attends Globetrotters game



The Harlem Globetrotters game was snowed out in January, but Our Gang members were able to see them at a recent rescheduled date. Our Gang is a program of Jewish Family & Community Services. Pictured from left are Jenny Chaney, Jose Morris, Trever Heck, and Ben Moody.

As a counselor with more than 25 years in the field and nearly two decades of clinical practice, I've seen what I often think of as an "invisible wall." It's the space many men create between what they experience internally and what they allow others to see. Stigma often mislabels the courage it takes to speak up as weakness. In reality, acknowledging struggle and taking steps to address it is a form of strength. When mental health needs go unaddressed, the impact often shows up elsewhere - in work, relationships, and daily functioning.

The data tells part of the story. In the United States, nearly 1 in 10 men experience depression or anxiety, yet fewer than half receive treatment. Men are also significantly more likely to die by suicide than women. These numbers reflect more than access. They reflect stigma, expectations, and long-standing beliefs about what it means to be "strong."

For many of us, strength has been defined as handling things on our own. Staying steady. Not letting others see when something feels off. Those messages can be subtle, but they add up over time especially if left unchecked.

I've experienced that pressure myself. Even as I trained to become a therapist, there was an internal expectation to be the one who had it together. Over the years, I've come to recognize the value of seeking support during difficult periods in my own life. Counseling offered perspective, clarity, and, at times, simply a place to sort things out during challenging times.

I've also seen what happens when support isn't part of the equation. Growing up, there were people close to me who carried more than they needed to on their own. Looking back, I believe they could have benefited from having a space to talk, reflect, and be supported.

One professional experience in particular has stayed with me.

In my earlier career, while I was working at an outpatient counseling clinic, I received a counseling referral for an 85-year-old man who happened to be a former Navy Veteran, a police officer of 33 years, and who had competed in the World Masters weightlifting championship numerous times. For most of his life, he was the person others would have described as strong both physically and mentally. But after the very sudden

loss of his wife, he found himself facing a kind of weight he hadn't encountered before. We met regularly, and over time he began to process the grief he was carrying. Towards the end of our counseling relationship, he told me I must have "broad shoulders" to be able to sit with him in that pain on a weekly basis.

What stood out to me wasn't the comment itself, but what it represented. Here was someone who understood strength in a very real, physical way, recognizing that emotional challenges require a different kind of support. He wasn't giving something up by coming to counseling. He was adapting. He was allowing himself to approach a difficult situation in a new way. Through his tears, reflections, and our conversations he arrived at a place of peace and acceptance.

That perspective has stayed with me.

Counseling isn't about being broken. It's not a last resort. At its best, it's a place to think clearly, to process what's happening, and to find ways to move forward with intention. Many men find that once they step into that space, it feels less unfamiliar than they expected. This month is a reminder that paying attention to mental health is part of overall well-being. That might mean checking in with yourself, having an honest conversation with someone you trust, or considering professional support when it feels appropriate.

It can also mean paying attention to the people around you. Sometimes the men in our lives, such as friends, family members, and colleagues, don't say when something is weighing on them. A simple, genuine question can open the door more than we realize. Even saying "I've noticed you've been a bit quiet lately, how are things really going?" can lessen the weight and show genuine concern and care for the other person.

Seeking help is not a weakness. It's part of being human. After many years in this field, I've come to believe that strength isn't about being a solitary pillar carrying everything alone. It's about recognizing when something matters enough to address and being willing to reach out. That's not a weakness; it's a strategy for endurance. Just like a bridge, we are only as strong as the connections we maintain. Healing happens through those bonds, not isolation. It is in those ties that we find the strength to carry on.

Be well and be kind to yourself.

She plans to expand services through counseling groups, couples counseling, educational programs, and other supportive resources.

Fisher's past experience includes providing counseling services in both community mental health and private practice settings. She has primarily worked with adults ages 18 and older, but also has experience working with adolescents, couples, and groups.

"Throughout my career, I have supported individuals facing a wide range of concerns, including anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, life transitions, women's issues, chronic health conditions, and challenges related to emerging adulthood," she said. "I am also committed to providing affirming care for LGBTQ+ individuals."

She has experience providing clinical supervision to counselors-in-training and newly licensed counselors. Since 2014, she has taught college, both undergraduate and graduate level courses, as well as continuing education courses.

Fisher earned a bachelor of science in psychology with a minor in biology from the University of Mount Union and a master of education in clinical mental health counseling from Kent State University. She also earned an education specialist degree in counseling, also from KSU. She is licensed as a counselor in Ohio and is a licensed professional clinical counselor with a supervisory designation. She is a member of Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers, and currently serves as secretary of the Ohio Counseling Association.

"One of the things that excites me most about this role is the opportunity to serve my own community," Fisher said. "Since earning my counseling license, I have worked in other areas of Ohio, so being able to provide services close to home is especially meaningful."

She and her husband were born and raised in Youngstown.

"We met in middle school, started dating in high school, and have been together ever since," she said. "This January, we welcomed our daughter into the world, and becoming parents has been one of the greatest joys of our lives."

The family also includes their seven year old dog. And they feel fortunate to have their parents, siblings, niece, and nephews nearby, which allows them to stay closely connected. When she's not working, Fisher enjoys baking and reading.

"With a new baby at home, my hobbies have taken a bit of a backseat lately, but I still enjoy baking and reading thriller novels whenever I find the time," she said.

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