

# The “man code” and impact on opioid-related harms

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), there is an informal “code” governing men’s behaviour and attitudes, and it is one of the prime barriers preventing men from seeking help with mental health issues, such as addiction.

Men’s desire to abide by this code can cause them to mask their emotions and cope with physical or emotional pain, and demanding working conditions, with opioids or other drugs.

## Explain dangers

The term “toxic masculinity” is often used to describe a set of cultural norms that puts pressure on men to behave in a certain way, often based on outdated and unrealistic stereotypes of “manliness.” This does not mean that men are toxic. However, the pressures that society places on men to live up to unrealistic masculine ideals have been shown to be harmful to both men and women.

- Toxic masculinity has three core components:
  - Toughness:** The notion that men should be physically strong, behaviourally aggressive, and unemotional.
  - Anti-femininity:** The idea that men should reject anything considered to be feminine, such as showing emotion or accepting help.
  - **Power:** The assumption that men must work toward obtaining power and social and financial status to gain the respect of others.
- Men have a tendency to mask their mental health challenges and are less likely than women to access mental health services.
- Untreated depression is often acted out in men in the form of marked hostility, binge drinking, and sexual impulsivity.
- On average, eight men commit suicide every day in Canada, with single and divorced men over 40 being most at risk.
- Men have higher rates of substance use disorders than women do, while women have higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders.

- Significantly, more men than women die from opioid overdoses in Canada. This is particularly true in the construction industry.

## Identify controls

- Educate yourself and others about toxic masculinity and its outdated assumptions about gender roles.
- Support and encourage male co-workers who are brave enough to seek help or speak openly about their mental health struggles.
- Men who embrace physical, emotional, mental, and social self-care can have a positive “ripple effect” on those around them.
- Encourage male workers to practise proper self-care by eating regular, healthy meals, staying hydrated, sticking to a consistent sleep schedule, and staying connected to friends and family.

## Demonstrate

- Promote open dialogue about men’s mental health at your workplace. Use [IHSA’s safety talks](#) to promote conversation and challenge stigma or outdated beliefs about opioid use.
- Lead by example: practise self-care, stay connected with others, and reflect on your own biases or beliefs about opioids.
- The trailer for the film [The Mask You Live In](#) on YouTube gives a sense of the pressures placed upon boys and young men to define themselves based on a narrow and unhealthy definition of masculinity.
- Review [How to talk about mental health at your workplace \(W131\)](#), IHSA’s guide for supervisors delivering safety talks on mental health.