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New research shows why activity, not words, helps men open up

Australian clinical consultant and trauma specialist Dr Zoe Wyatt has published a new research article that explores how everyday settings like barbecues, workshops and shared walks can create safer ground for men to talk about their mental health, a timely contribution to Men's Mental Health Month this November. Her paper, *Beers, Barbecues and Biochemistry: Exploring Social Neuroscience in Men's Mental Health*, was published in *Psychiatry and Behavioral Health* (Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2025).

The research article blends neuroscience and biochemistry to explain why many men communicate more easily during shared activity than in direct, face to face conversation. When a person feels evaluated or judged, the body shifts into a protective state that narrows attention and makes speech more effortful. Familiar, low pressure routines signal safety to the nervous system, supporting a calmer state in which thinking broadens and words are easier to find.

Dr Wyatt writes that "talking side by side, rather than face to face, helps regulate the nervous system and allows language and thought to flow more freely." Predictable sequences and small shared tasks, such as cooking or repairing something together, help men remain engaged and emotionally balanced, which increases the likelihood of more open conversation.

The research also connects biology to culture. Masculine identity, she explains, is learned and reinforced from childhood through family, peers and media. Many men are socialised to value toughness and control, which can make vulnerability feel risky. In peer settings, reputation and belonging often depend on conforming to group expectations. As a result, many men prefer "doing" over "talking", because activity preserves competence while still creating room for connection.

"Men do talk, but context is everything," says Dr Wyatt. "When we design environments that feel familiar, purposeful and free from judgement, we make space for the kind of conversations that can save lives."

Her work points to simple, practical interventions. In workplaces, community groups and homes, structured and familiar activities such as shared cooking, brief check-ins after sport or team based projects can encourage men to speak more openly. These settings lower stress responses, reduce the fear of evaluation and increase the likelihood of seeking help.

Key findings

- Biology meets behaviour. High evaluation situations trigger defensive physiological responses, while shared activity supports co regulation and calm engagement.

- Predictability matters. Familiar routines act as cues of safety that widen focus and make communication easier.
- Culture defines comfort. When masculine roles are respected and language avoids undermining competence, men are more likely to speak honestly.

What you can do now

Drawing on the research and Dr Wyatt's practical guidance, here are simple actions families, friends and workplaces can use this month:

1. Use the two topic rule. Open with something concrete about the shared task, then pivot once with a specific check in. For example, "How has work been, really?"
2. Ask one hard thing. Try "What is one hard thing you are carrying this week?" Time bound and specific questions work better than broad prompts.
3. Practise the 90 second listen. No fixes, no jokes, no "at least". Give uninterrupted attention for ninety seconds so performance mode can drop and honesty can rise.
4. Build connection streaks. Message three mates a day for a week with one specific question. Small, regular contact builds the network that carries people through tough patches.
5. Skill up everyday touchpoints. Barbers, gyms and worksites already see men. Offer simple prompts and a referral script so they can be effective bridges to support.
6. Know the red flags and words that help. Watch for sudden withdrawal, giving valued items away, reckless spikes or comments like "You would be better off without me". Say, "I am not going anywhere. Let us get you through tonight. We can call together," and connect to appropriate crisis services in your area.

The paper concludes that improving men's mental health begins not with asking men to change, but with reshaping the environments around them. It calls for communities, workplaces and families to make time and space for simple, genuine connection, places where conversation feels natural, trust can grow and the first step toward support is easier to take. As Men's Mental Health Month continues, Dr Wyatt's research article reminds us that progress often begins with the smallest gestures: a shared task, a quiet chat or a moment of attention that helps a man feel seen and safe.

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About Dr Zoe Wyatt

Dr Zoe Wyatt is an Australian clinical consultant and trauma specialist based in Cairns, Australia. Her research and practice focus on how social connection, emotional safety and predictable environments support mental health and recovery. She helps organisations, leaders and communities design psychologically safe cultures that support wellbeing and resilience.

Relevant links:

Website: <https://www.drzoewyatt.com/>

Socials: <https://www.facebook.com/DrZoeWyatt/>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Zoe-Wyatt>

Media contact

Vincent Potage

M +61 418 793 957

E vpotage@gmail.com