

MensLine Australia: improving access to support for Australian men

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Randal Newton-John has been working in the area of men's relationships, health and wellbeing over the last ten years. He has facilitated men's groups in the areas of work/life balance and wellbeing. At Crisis Support Services he was initially employed as a counsellor for MensLine Australia and has gone on to manage a number of projects. This included the Bushfire Emergency Aftermath Rebuild (EAR) telephone counselling service that supported men and women after the devastating Black Saturday fires in Victoria, February 2009. In his current role as Program Leader—Men's Service he oversees the MensLine Australia program. Randal is keen to continually improve men's support services and is currently implementing an online counselling component for MensLine Australia.

Introduction

MensLine Australia (MLA) is the only national telephone service specifically for men, focusing on relationship concerns. It is staffed by professional counsellors and operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and answers more than 35,000 calls a year. MLA also operates a Call Back Service that provides up to six free telephone counselling sessions from the same counsellor. The MLA Call back service (MLA CBS) assists more than 500 clients a year. MLA is managed by Crisis Support Services (CSS). CSS acknowledges the support of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Service and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) in funding MLA.

Before continuing I want to give a sense of the types of the real issues and complexities faced by men in rural setting, especially in regards to their relationships. These three stories are based on calls to the line.

One caller to MLA lived in a small mining community because that was home for his ex-partner and where her family lived. He did not want to live there, in fact he hated it, but chose to in order to spend extended time with his children. He worked in a mining camp further away, two weeks on and one week off. The caller's support network was in a major city a long way from this community. He started to come to terms with his separation itself but expressed how hard it was to find another partner. There was not a lot of women to meet in the community and he thought who is up for such a life in a place that is "remote, harsh, isolated and with lack of services". To make matters more difficult, this caller had ongoing mental health issues that required ongoing support.

Another guy, in his 50s moved with his wife to a small rural community to make a fresh start. She found work and made strong connections through her work in the local pub. She also began to drink more and enjoy the company of the locals, but he had problems joining in her lifestyle and this put stress on their relationship. When they separated she had a strong network of support and he was an "outsider". He was desperate to work out the relationship, because he felt he had no options having uprooted himself to be there.

A third man, a farmer has dealt with years of drought. He has taken to a 2nd job-truck driving-to make up the short fall of what is needed to keep the farm. He called MLA from a truck somewhere on the road in the middle of the night. He was in a relationship that has become mutually abusive with physical and emotional violence at both ends. Being on a farm, he has access to guns. What really scared him, even more than the suicidal thoughts he had been having, was the fear that he can't deal with one of his emotional outbursts and would use the gun on his wife in fit of rage.

As you can see, MLA counsellors need to be able to work with immensely complex and difficult issues. No two stories are the same, and each requires great skill and sensitivity.

MLA regional and rural callers

MLA receives call from men in regional, rural and remote areas proportionally higher than the general population. About 40% of calls to MLA come from regional, rural and remote areas, compared with approximately 33% of the Australian population living in these areas. MLA not only targets this population, but also is a service that is well suited to the issues that face men in non metropolitan areas.

When comparing the types of calls to MLA from regional, rural and remote areas, there are some significant differences compared with metropolitan calls. MLA analysed calls from January to December 2010 from these areas. For the sake of this analysis MLA used postcode reported by clients to break down their location in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

I would like to say that these statistics debunk the myth of the Aussie male but, if anything, they tend to reinforce the traditional stereotypes when it comes to men, relationships and wellbeing. However, these statistics point to trends and certainly do not represent the diversity of presentations from regional and rural callers.

- Callers from regional and rural areas tended to more likely be aged over 35. Rural callers to MLA are 12% more likely to be aged 35-44 than the metropolitan MLA caller. This age bracket is typically a time that relationships can come under strain. At this time of life couples often have young children. They are likely to have been together for some time and the honeymoon phase of their relationship is well and truly over. There has been time for emotional issues to fester if they have not been resolved. Also, couples in this age range often have greater financial commitments which also create strain on relationships.
- Regional and rural callers call more often from the larger states—WA and QLD—as would be expected given the size of those states.
- Relationship status and children: A much higher percentage of callers in rural areas have children (by 13%) and are more likely to be in a marriage OR separated. Other types of relationship status are less common, including single, defector, casual relationships and same sex relationships. Clients tend to be either in a marriage or out of one and less likely to be focusing on other relationships. This may suggest a greater pressure to be in a marriage and an expectation that the marriage will provide the majority of social support. This is a typical problem for men who often place a great deal of their emotional energy into their primary relationships at the expense of other social relationships.
- MLA records the main issue discussed in calls. Men from rural areas discuss interpersonal issues more often, but discuss physical/mental health and sexual issues less often. These ties in with the stereotype that the traditional Aussie bloke does not like to talk about his health issues. Rural callers for MLA discuss Legal/financial/material issues more often than the general MLA population. This suggests a greater preoccupation with practical issues.
- Caller outcomes survey in November 2010 showed that 6.6% of caller reported being affected by drought, 5.8% by the Victorian Bushfires and 3.6% by storms or floods.
- As expected there a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander callers form rural areas compared with general MLA population.

Issues faced by men in regional and rural areas

What are some of the main issues that men face in regards to relationship issues in rural areas and how does MensLine Australia help to address them? Of course many of the issues that men face are similar across the nation, and even globally, but we see some particular issues that are more prevalent for men in these areas.

Masculinity and masculine culture

Of course men from rural areas require resilience to deal with a harsh environment. But the risk with this is that being 'resilient' becomes a way of being, which can turn into becoming armoured emotionally. Intimate relationships require the ability to express vulnerability. It can be difficult to be vulnerable if men believe it is necessary to be tough all the time.

When there are mental health and relationship issues, men with this attitude may find themselves without the skill or confidence to ask for help.

MensLine Australia acknowledges and respects the masculine culture. Counsellors often find that men respond to being direct, even blunt in their approach, and the feedback we receive is that they often appreciate this.

Sometimes counsellors will need to subvert that belief in being tough, by acknowledging the courage and strength it takes to front up to a health worker, or to admit that they are afraid or depressed.

The MLA uses a solution-focused clinical model. It speaks to the male desire to fix their problems. Counsellor work with the client to come up with their own solution, and work in a 'side by side' manner, rather than giving advice.

However, what is less understood is that men, in a safe environment, are willing to divulge their deepest feelings. Therefore MLA counsellors don't just focus on solutions. The anonymity of the phone allows for a man to feel freer to open up. He does not have to show his 'face' and saving 'face' is still a powerful motivation in male culture. Admitting his vulnerabilities on the phone may give him more confidence to show this side to his loved ones.

Stigma in small towns

Men often face pressure from small town culture. Other people know their business and a reputation that is damaged in a small town can be very hard to repair. The fear of having their reputation damaged can lead to greater secrecy and unwillingness to attend community support services. It's possible the community service worker is involved in the situation personally, or there has been previous conflict with that worker or their family.

MLA helps here because of the anonymity of service. Rather than having to front up to a community health service, they can call in private. The Call Back Service also allows clients to have medium term counselling in privacy. Many men report that calling MLA is the first time they have had counselling. Our work is to provide a model for the therapeutic relationships that may be transferred into other health professionals.

Lack of/inappropriate services

There is often a lack of community services in small rural towns. There may be no specialised services for men. If a man has to travel to a service, this will add to the cost and time in attending.

MLA is a free service, including the Call Back Service. The service can be accessed from any phone, anywhere in the country. Also, MLA has a high response rate—with well over 80% of calls answered the first time. It fits a busy work schedule and, being free, men do not have the excuse that they have 'better things to pay for than counselling.'

He may fear, or even experience that many family services are code for 'women and children' and he may not feel comfortable attending these services. Knowing this is a service specifically for men, often gives men the confidence that they will be treated with respect.

Separation

If separation occurs in a rural setting, it is quite likely that one person will move out of town. If children are involved this means the non primary care giver will need to travel, often by air, to meet their children. This is often the father. This increases not only the financial pressure, but also can lead to greater conflict with the mother of the children.

MLA can help coach men in how to stay in contact even with distance. Counsellors reiterate the important of quality of the child-father relationship, and not focus on the quantity of interaction (although this can be difficult point to get across; many men get fixated on the number of days they see their child). Call backs service means we can provide continuity of service if travelling.

Lack of good legal service and mediation can also be a huge issue for men in rural areas. Counsellors have access to an extensive referral database, and can refer to telephone based legal services.

Effect of environmental crises on relationships

Droughts, fires and floods: The extra burden of dealing with short term or long term environmental crises means that men may put their energy into survival, literally or economically, and time for relationships takes a back seat. Sometimes the trauma of these events irrevocably changes a relationship. MLA operated a service for the 2009 Victorian Bushfires and it was a common situation that long term relationships broke up after

these traumatic events. Families were forced to live in difficult, often cramped living environments such as caravans and this lead to more conflict.

Because men can access the service in their own time and place, they can do it when they have time and around irregular or long work hours. So when they are ready to talk about it, MLA is there. That may be 3 o'clock in the morning.

Fly in/fly out lifestyle

Fly in/fly lifestyle of many mining workers creates a number of issues that adds pressure to relationships:

- A predominantly male culture in mining camps may not be aligned with the family culture. The man has to keep adjusting between two cultures.
- The family learns to cope with the man not being there. It can be hard for the family to adjust to the man returning home. The man can feel like a square peg in a round hole and feel as if his role in the family is redundant
- Relationships thrive on day to day interactions and negotiations that can help to sooth and moderate conflict. A lot of pressure is put on the time when the man is home to make this work and this adds more pressure to the relationship
- This type of work disrupts routines, especially for children and this can have a negative effect on children's relationship with their father. For instance, he may not be around to attend his children's school and social events.
- Jealousy and fear of infidelity builds as the man is away. Indeed, if the relationship is not strong, then there are more opportunities for this to occur.

The Call Back Service, in particular, can support men who live in different places, and develop internal and external resources to prepare for the transitions.

MensLine Australia online resources

Naturally, for people who are isolated online resources can be very valuable. MLA's website has a range of resources that may be valuable for men:

- Tip sheets—short, practical information on a range of relationship issues
- Self help 'work sheets'; these are downloadable PDFs that give men a chance to specifically work on areas of communication, self care and anger management. These worksheets contain practical or written exercises to move ideas into action.
- MLA forum: This allows men to discuss issues related to relationships and separation with each other. This is moderated by MLA counsellors 24 hours a day
- New and Events relevant to men and relationships
- MLA counsellors have access to the CSS Service Database called JIGSAW—including Google maps, this database contains thousands of entries in an easy to find format.
- Online counselling pilot project—allows men to have text based online counselling. Clients are booked in for online sessions and then connect to the counsellor on that time and day.