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Using public spaces for male community mental health support

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ABSTRACT

Mental health services have traditionally found men a difficult group to reach. Many men are reluctant to seek help when their mental health declines, often feeling stigmatized and responsible for their symptoms. Most men view conventional mental health support as feminized and unhelpful, preferring the company of other men to help support their mental wellbeing. This research used focus group methods to explore the experiences of 24 men who attended four different nonclinical community based mental health support services held in public spaces. The spaces described in the study were a public house, a football stadium, a sports center and village hall. Our findings demonstrate the importance of offering a range of male community spaces with welcoming environments where men can encounter positive masculine role models. These types of environments encourage men to challenge their own attitudes and behaviors around help seeking and mental wellbeing. We suggested the following areas for policy development; referral pathways; male friendly mental health spaces; and multi-tiered group support and digital peer support platforms.

KEYWORDS

Community; men; mental health; policy; public space

Literature review

It is well documented that men tend to be more difficult to reach than women when it comes to accessing mental health support (Good & Wood, 1995; Pollack, 2005; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020; Sheikh et al., 2025). There seem to be certain behavioral and psychological barriers some men have which actively prevents them from seeking help when their mental health declines (Seidler et al., 2016; Steinfeldt et al., 2009). This is particularly concerning given the higher than average global male suicide rates, estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) as 12.6 of males per 100,000 people compared to 5.4 of females per 100,000. WHO statistics from the Americas show male suicide is five times that of females. European male suicide is four times higher than that of women and in the Western Pacific region male suicide rates are double that of females. In the UK The Office for National Statistics (2021) reports men have accounted for three-quarters of all deaths by suicide since the 1990s. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in young men aged between 15–29 years old, with almost 60% of all suicides occurring before the age of 50 (WHO, 2025).

Even though for almost all individual characteristics, there is greater variation among men than between women and men, it is interesting to note that men do tend to treat symptoms of anxiety and depression differently to women. When undergoing mental health crisis men often hide their feelings, withdraw from social life and ruminate on the stigma of experiencing mental health problems. If left unchecked, some men may believe their loved ones would be better off if they were dead. Others may fantasize about killing themselves. Some men will attempt suicide, others unfortunately, will take their own lives (Oliffe et al., 2019).

Some writers suggest the reason men may be more difficult to reach than women is to do with the male influences they had in childhood. Qualities boys derive from other males whilst growing up tend to suggest attitudes such as stoicism, self-independence, aggression, and strength as a positive in all

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situations (McGrane et al., 2020). Some men adopt behaviors of dominance, emotional control and a lack of vulnerability which further impedes help seeking (Emslie et al., 2006).

Men tend to shun counseling and psychotherapy for reasons connected to these learned attitudes with some men regarding mental health issues as shameful and stigmatizing (Levant et al., 2009). Men also regard the traditional process of counseling and psychotherapy as feminized and not appropriate for their preferred way to interact. This is not surprising when we consider that in the United States 74% of therapists are female, Canada has around 82% female therapists, whilst in Australia around 79.8% of women are counselors or psychotherapists. A similar situation exists in the United Kingdom where 84% of practicing counselors and therapists are female (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021; Brown, 2023; Canadian Institute for Health Education, 2023; Cross River Therapy, 2023).

Along with counseling and therapeutic spaces being regarded as feminized, many men feel traditional therapy is unhelpful, with some therapists having little understanding of the different needs of male clients and females. Many writers go so far as to suggest female therapists may hold unconscious bias toward the men they work with (Judd et al., 2009; Owen et al., 2009; Seidler et al., 2016, 2019).

Often men have attitudes not conducive to traditional therapeutic ways of working and regard their societal role differently to women. Men sometimes actively resist disclosing personal information, expressing emotions, and embracing vulnerability whilst simultaneously holding negative attitudes toward seeking any form of therapeutic help (Cole et al., 2019; Levant et al., 2009). Men who do attend therapy tend to have higher expectations of the therapist's expertise and effectiveness whilst taking less personal responsibility for change within their sessions (Schaub & Williams, 2007).

Mental health services have begun to tackle these issues through targeted male mental health campaigns. These campaigns have had some success especially when initiatives are delivered at suitably appropriate times and are priced within a reasonable budget (Hammer & Vogel, 2010; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2018; Seidler, Rice, Ogrodniczuk, et al., 2018). Researchers from disciplines such as nursing, social work, psychology, and psychiatry have all attempted to reduce the barriers to male help seeking by considering working positively with masculine identities and their differentiated needs (Seidler, Rice, Ogrodniczuk, et al., 2018).

There are a number of alternative approaches to working with men's mental health that utilize community-based projects to help men understand and normalize their feelings around mental well-being and the personal impact of mental ill health (Robertson et al., 2016; Shepherd et al., 2023). Research acknowledges many men to be inherently social who place great value on helping one another in group settings, considering male community an important part of their lives (Vickery, 2022, 2025). Men's mental health and well-being typically improve through stronger social connections between men and their peers (Botha & Bower, 2024; Ratcliffe et al., 2021, 2024). As Kiselica and Englar-Carlson (2010) suggested, mental health services concentrating on positive male attributes and male bonding have the capacity to serve as an avenue for building friendships and intimacy through action-focused community activities.

Although there are many disparate academic studies of male mental health community, relatively few have been extensively discussed. The Mankind project is one example of a mutual support group which has been evident within the literature (Mankowski et al., 2000; Mankowski & Silvergleid, 1999), whilst the American Journal of Community Psychology featured a special issue on men's community support in 2010 (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). Much of men's community research has focused on sports-based models of connection. Such models seek to improve men's mental well-being through strengthening the social connections which engaging in shared sporting experiences can bring (Darongkamas et al., 2011; McGrane et al., 2020). Football has a long history of research within men's community mental health and is an extremely popular sport played by men across the world (Darongkamas et al., 2011; Dixon et al., 2019; Hargreaves & Pringle, 2019; McEwan et al., 2019; McGrane et al., 2020; Moloney & Rohde, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2014). Amongst other things, football can strengthen male intimacy (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010), improve mental health for men who feel isolated (Seidler et al., 2022) and act as a stress relief for men facing interpersonal issues such as relationship problems where traditional support may be deemed insufficient (McKenzie et al., 2018). It is worth noting that as well as the positive aspects of men's participation in sports, there have also been

studies charting the correlation, particularly in young men's sport between sports participation and sexual violence and aggression toward women (Forbes et al., 2006; Mordecai, 2017; Schwets, 2025).

Another significant example of community-based support is the Men's Sheds movement, a male community-based service which originated in 1990s Australia after concerns were raised around the wellbeing of older men (Earle et al., 1996; Kelly et al., 2019; Milligan et al., 2016; Wilson & Cordier, 2013). This initiative provides recreational spaces for men to design, construct and mend items within a "shed" alongside other men. Within this informal setting men can engage in conversation, exchange advice, discuss their health concerns and share their life experiences (Kelly et al., 2019). Researchers have noted the benefits of the Men's Sheds program include improvement mental health and reduced isolation (Kelly et al., 2019; Wilson & Cordier, 2013). The sheds initiative is spreading across the world as researchers and mental health services recognize its utility and connective power. Amongst other places there are now Men's Sheds in the USA, Canada, the UK, New Zealand and Denmark (Men's Sheds, 2025).

In light of these community-based initiatives, the following research takes place within a UK based men's mental health and suicide prevention charity known as MenGage. The charity creates community and connectedness with its members through a series of regular and diverse activities held in public spaces. These spaces are well attended by a proportion of the 300 strong membership. Within this research project we asked the following question: "What are the experiences of men utilizing public spaces to help support their mental health?"

Service overview

MenGage is a UK based grassroots initiative focused on men's mental health and suicide prevention. Over the past decade, MenGage has grown from an informal group of men seeking more open and honest connections with each other to a more structured UK charity. The organization's purpose evolved as members reflected on the ways in which poor mental health affected their male peers, who often suffered with poor mental health or had experiences of crisis or suicidal thoughts.

Currently, MenGage includes around 300 members aged from 18 to over 60 who interact with one another on a closed social media app. To join the social media app, men send an e-mail from the MenGage website. Before being allowed onto the app men are provided with information about the culture and values of the organization and how MenGage is not a replacement for mental health crisis support. Men are also furnished with guidelines in terms of standards of behavior they must uphold when communicating with one another. Once a man agrees to these principles, they are welcomed onto the main social media app where they can chat with other men and attend a range of offline, volunteer-led groups. Typically, men joining this group are white British with only around 5% of men originating from different cultural backgrounds. This is due to the geographical area MenGage is active within having a predominantly white British demography.

MenGage facilitates approximately 10 volunteer-led community activity groups which take place in real-world settings across their geographic area. Activities include a board game group, a running group, a tennis group, and a "walk and talk" group. For the purposes of this study, we focused specifically on four groups; the public house video games group, the sports center social football group, the village hall breakfast group, and the stadium-based talk group.

The public house video games group convenes monthly, providing members with an informal opportunity to meet in a local pub and engage in video gaming together. Consistent with all MenGage activities, trained volunteers welcome members upon arrival, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging. Volunteers facilitate introductions among participants and ensure the evening unfolds smoothly, remaining available for individual conversation if members wish.

The sports center social football group meets three-times weekly and offers a noncompetitive space where men come together to play six-a-side football. Unlike traditional competitive matches, the emphasis is on camaraderie, mutual support, and enjoyment rather than athletic performance. Participants of varying abilities play side by side, encouraging teamwork without keeping score of "goals." Importantly, men on the sidelines are available to provide informal peer support, creating a safe space for those who may wish to share personal concerns.

The village hall breakfast group meets once a month and invites men to gather for relaxed conversation over coffee and sandwiches. This informal and welcoming setting encourages connection within a rural community context. Attendance in this group is quite consistent as the group facilitates relationship-building through shared interests and open discussion. As with other groups, trained volunteers support introductions and initiate conversations that vary in depth and intensity according to the members' preferences.

The stadium-based talk group meets monthly at a local sports stadium, providing a space for members to reflect on their experiences in small, supportive groups. Volunteer facilitators guide the sessions with an emphasis on candid, nonpathologizing dialogue in a nonclinical environment. Participation is voluntary and without pressure; men may choose whether to contribute verbally or simply offer their presence as silent witnesses, an experience many find valuable.

The MenGage service does not track group attendance in terms of registrations at their public spaces but rely on volunteer co-ordinators to feedback levels of engagement and attendance after each group meets. Some spaces have the same men attending each session, whilst other spaces are more ad hoc. This approach leaves men the option to attend or not attend, and importantly places no pressure on them to feel obliged to attend in order to keep the group running. This is important as this attitude helps make each space feel relaxed, friendly and welcoming.

Methodology

This research understands the lived experience of participants as socially constructed and uses a phenomenological lens to gain insight into our participants experiences (Finlay, 2011). Phenomenological research is always influenced by the researchers own ontological frame which, in reflexive thematic analysis is linked to analytic practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The approach we use within this project is based on a constructivist, interpretivist methodology which understands everyone's lived experience as ideographic and unique (Schwandt, 1998). The research was part of a larger project where our team worked with MenGage to understand the service in broader terms. Access was provided to members by two male researchers (JW and SW) who had a history of working within this group. These two had gained trust and respect within MenGage through their extensive interactions with the service over the past four years. Three of the research team were males with an average age of 46, with a female member of the team (HM) aged 28. The researcher dynamics held a number of hidden power and control dimensions, such as the power of the MenGage researchers controlling access to the focus groups, the seniority of researcher xiii as the Principal Investigator and the difference in power relations between the three male researchers and the single, younger female. We surfaced and explored these power dynamics through regular meetings where everyone had the opportunity to reflect on the research process and challenge one another over any issues around dominance or power experienced in the research team (see Walsh, 2003).

Participants

The Principal Investigator (GS) and JW and SW worked to identify suitable focus group participants after advertising through MenGage's social media platforms. Recruitment criteria stated men needed to have attended five or more community sessions (five or more village hall breakfast groups for instance) to be eligible for inclusion. Our participant profile was white British heterosexual men, aged between 30 and 60 years old (mean age 42) employed in manual or managerial occupations who had been MenGage members between one and four years. We used purposive sampling to select our participants as this was a clear and defined research group (Hennink et al., 2020). After gaining ethical approval from York St John University (Reference ETH2324-0204), we developed semi-structured interviews based on Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) "thematizing" recommendations.

For this research we were interested in speaking to participants of the four community spaces groups described above. We aimed to run one focus group for each group ($k = 4$); the focus groups had six participants in each group ($n = 6$). Everyone who offered their time to contribute to a focus group attended the session and was eager to share their experiences. This suggests MenGage has developed goodwill and a certain good standing within their membership. As a research team, we believe this is

due to the enthusiasm and willingness of current members to act as volunteer to run groups. Volunteers take on responsibility for their group and foster social connectedness through their interactions with participants, some of whom are already known to them through the messaging app. Volunteers who suggest creating groups are initially "vetted" and then trained by the trustees before they are allowed to run their group. This helps to develop groups with similar values and ethos, ensuring volunteers help transmit MenGage values within each group session.

Research questions

Before formulating the research questions, we "clarified" the purpose of the study, gained "preknowledge" of the subject through literature searches before "devising" the most appropriate interview technique to adopt. The focus group interviews were carried out by GS. Individuals were interviewed at the community venue in a private prearranged place before the group began. Each interview lasted between 1 h and 1 h 20 min. A digital recording was made at the focus group which was transferred onto the University Microsoft One Drive secure cloud-based server afterwards. The original digital recording was deleted once the One Drive copy was made.

Data analysis

A manual thematic analysis was carried out by GS and HM in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of Thematic Analysis. Transcription of each focus group interview used the Microsoft Word Transcribe function, with transcriptions manually checked for accuracy by HM and GS. After transcription, GS highlighted sections of the data relevant to the research question. HM also familiarized themselves with the transcripts, reading them several times to deepen their understanding of the data and patterns amongst the data. HM and GS made notes on potential coding patterns that could be returned to in later phases of the analysis to increase trustworthiness of the process (Nowell et al., 2017).

Initial codes were generated by GS and HM double coded 20% of the data to increase reliability and validity. HM and GS compared codes for clarification. HM and GS then developed the codes further and arranged them into initial themes. Microsoft Word was used to organize the codes and themes into a table. To enhance trustworthiness two other researchers JW and SW reviewed the themes and made recommendations for amendments. Finally, HM and GS used these recommendations as a basis to create final themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The research and analysis process itself were interesting as each of the focus group was very keen to speak to the research team and provide their opinions about the public spaces they used. We were struck by the levels of honesty of responses and the vulnerability some focus group members clearly demonstrated. These interactions felt authentic both in the groups themselves and in the transcribed documents. In the coding process we felt it important to include all of the research team and to provide an opportunity for each member of the group to suggest changes to the coding and thematic elements.

Results

This study asked, "What are the experiences of men utilizing public spaces to help support their mental health?" After analysis of the focus group discussions, we identified five distinctive themes linked to notions of the use of public spaces, community connections, and mental health. We categorized the five themes as follows; discovering the spaces; experiencing the space; making connections within the space; deepening connections in vulnerable spaces; and continuing conversations in online spaces (please see the coding tree, Figure 1).

When reviewing the data from the focus groups, we noted how the groups responded to one another from a group-level in line with Morgan's (1997) recommendation that focus groups be treated as single units of analysis. Rather than focusing solely on the individual responses within each group, the interactions between participants were explored to help us understand how collective responses and exchanges shaped the emergent themes. Overall, our focus group members were willing to engage in answering the research questions in what we determined as a collegiate and supportive manner.

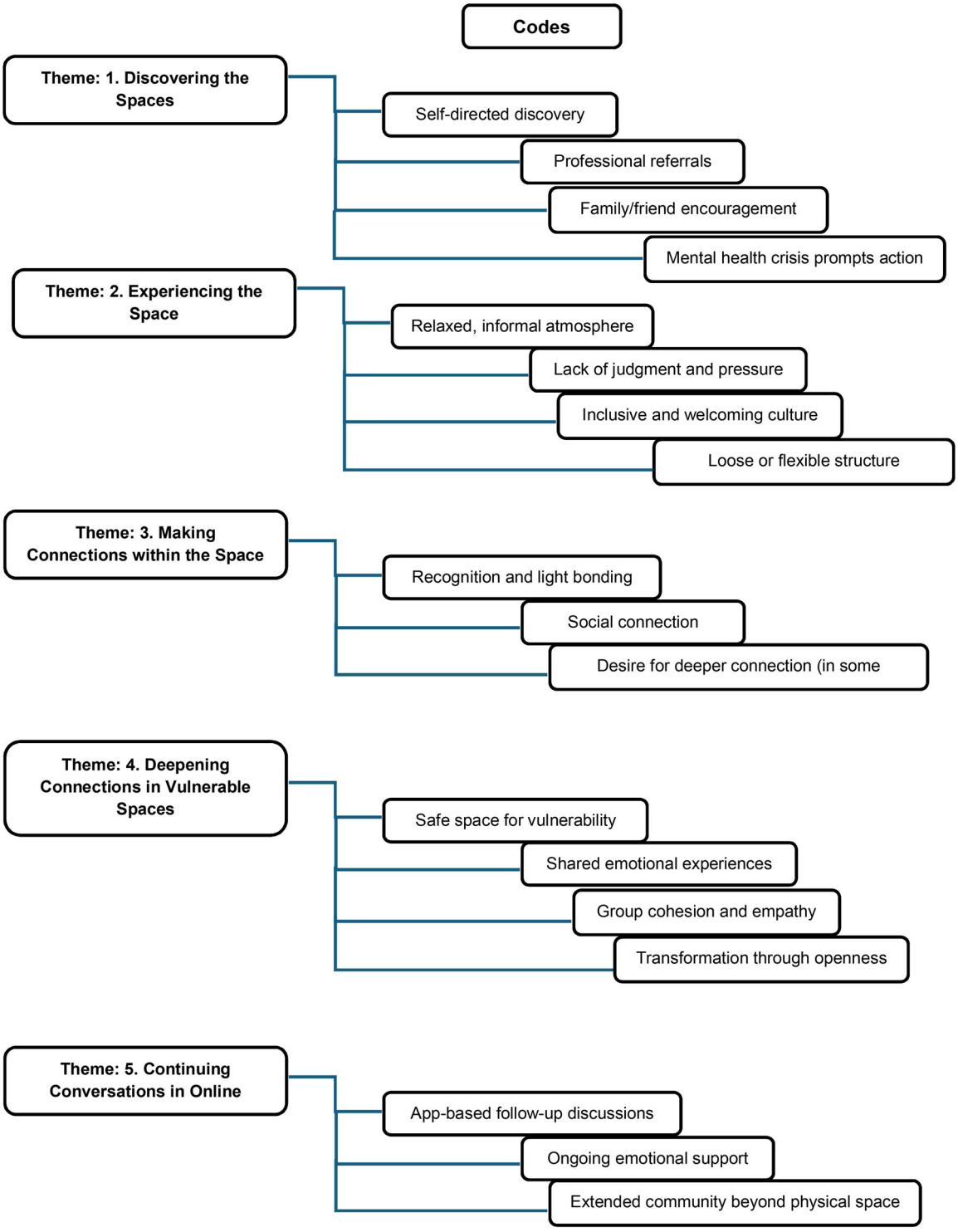

Figure 1. Coding tree.

Participants of the public house video games focus group were a very friendly and had an informality in their interactions. Group members seemed keen to share their experiences with one another and seemed to reinforce the view that the strength of their group was in how open and friendly people were. This group contained a member who seemed a little unhappy he hadn't made the close connections he was expecting and was shown sympathy by a few other members when he aired his view. The group agreed that this type of venue was based on informality and an acceptance of anyone who wished to come to the public house and drop-in to play video games or simply chat

The sports center social football focus group were interviewed at the center before their regular game. Each member was very keen to discuss how the model of noncompetitiveness was both unique and very self-validating. The group had an air of team spirit about them and answered our questions within a sporting context, often referring to games they had been involved in and the experiences of camaraderie or bonding that this provided. This group were more likely to crack a joke or appear self-deprecating when answering some questions and this seemed to be recognized and accepted as a way of expressing male intimacy and fondness to other men in the group.

The village hall breakfast group members interacted with one another in a little more formal, but still very friendly manner. Throughout this focus group, two members were looking after children who were drawing pictures as their father's spoke. This group agreed that the village hall was a place to unwind and finish off the week through friendly discussion and sharing commonalities together. The focus group were all supportive of one another's narratives and seemed as though they each were each having a specific need met through their attendance.

The stadium-based talk focus group members were much more serious and considered than the other three groups. Although there was still an air of friendliness and collegiality the group seemed to communicate their ideas in a much more thoughtful way. The stories and experiences shared within this group seemed to be valuable and, in some ways, "cherished" by group members. Each answer participants gave to our questions seemed to have a shared history that many group members recognized. There was little interruption in the group as members recounted their experiences. All answers to our questions were acknowledged as important as they seemed to represent parts of a personal journey each member seemed to have undergone or was still going through.

This group level overview helps to add context to the different ways each MenGage group functions. There seems to be a common thread of support and community and, running alongside these varying levels of intimacy, depth, and connection. We believe this reinforces the value each group member recognizes in attending their chosen public spaces and the level of deep trust and individual support the charity has developed.

Discovering the spaces

Some men discover the MenGage public spaces through their own efforts, whilst many men discovered the spaces through recommendations from health professionals, family members, or friends. Men often recounted how their mental distress, desperation or crisis had prompted action from those around them. The public space became for some men, a "last gasp" opportunity for them to find support and solace within a new and untested setting. In this excerpt Participant 2 recalls how they discovered the sports center social football space and how different it was from other traditional football spaces:

> I didn't actually know what MenGage was when I came down for the first time. It was my friend who recommended that we go down and try this football group out, and I've been to football groups in the past and I've been there all night and nobody's asked me my name!

MenGage receives referrals from medical professionals as Participant 1, from the stadium talk based group describes:

> My doctor through the social prescriber sent me along and I didn't know what to expect, but it took me a few weeks to recognize that my fundamental understanding of what it was to be a man was wrong. And it was so wrong!

Participant 5 tells a familiar story of how he discovered the village hall breakfast group space through others:

> It was actually my wife who mentioned MenGage to me, she's known about it for a while and also my doctor recommended it to me as well.

In this extract, Participant 1's wife recommends the stadium-based talk group to her husband:

> I was in the unfortunate position where in June me and my wife had a blazing row and … she found MenGage on [social media] and … she said, look I think this would be really good for you.

Men attending these public spaces often struggled with their mental health with some describing being at the lowest point in their lives as these participant's recount:

> When I first started MenGage I was in a very kind of destructive headspace and I didn't need to come down to football to talk about my feelings. (Participant 2, sports center social football)

> I didn't have any expectations going in; before I started coming here, I was at the lowest of the low, to the point where I was like, I'm gonna (sic.) try this and if it doesn't work, I'm done. I've tried to commit suicide in the past so the fact that I'm still alive, it's kind of testament to the value of this group. (Participant 3, stadium-based talk group)

> I remember, like, sort of the night I was in sort of a really low place last year. I had a nervous breakdown and the night before, I remember being sort of sat on the bathroom floor just being like "I need to do this now, it's the right time and I need to be committed to it." (Participant 6, stadium-based talk group)

Experiencing the space

Although the public spaces were quite different, they each shared some similarities in the way they offered these men community support. Participants reflected on the way in which the spaces had a relaxed air, were nonjudgmental and had loose leadership structures. These factors tended to make men feel safe within a welcoming environment:

Participant 2 from the football group reflects on how unusual the space was when he began to attend the group:

> It's quite easy to get into and it was very relaxed; it was the first game I've played where you don't count if a team scores, so at first, I wondered "is this the right place for me?"

Participant 2 in the public house video games group reflected on how important the MenGage community has become for him:

> The social aspect of it has become the forefront for me now because I get more from that than I realized. I can now come down to see my friends and chat about things or not chat, play videogames and just have a coffee or a pint of beer.

Participant 3 at the village hall breakfast group had a similar experience of their own relaxed environment:

> I've been to a couple of the other events as well but this one's different, it's just very relaxed and very chill and there's people that come here that don't go to the other events, which is good.

Many men appreciated the way in which the MenGage spaces were nonjudgmental, allowing them to attend activities with the confidence they would be accepted by others:

> It was competitive, but there were no scores … I've never played a football match with no scores and you could just shoot from one end of the pitch to the other and not get shouted at! [Players] actually cheer you on for taking that long shot, which I think is great because I've fallen back in love with football. (Participant 1, sports center social football)

> When I started coming to MenGage, my life was falling apart a bit and I was down to two or three people I actually trusted. And what I've found here is that people don't judge me, they take me for who I am. There isn't those instant questions of social and class structure of "what do you do for a living?" "How much do you earn?" (Participant 5, stadium-based talk group)

> I don't care whether people have a lot in common with me, the thing that matters is we trust each other and we don't judge each other. I know they are decent human beings that I trust. (Participant 4, stadium-based talk group)

Two other common narratives around men's experience of the spaces included the way in which the spaces felt welcoming and how the spaces had a loosely defined structure.

> The football was the first thing I came down to and what struck me first about it was how welcoming everybody was I think football has a thing of being a bit toxic at times and I've never found that down at this football group and I think that just promotes such a safe environment for people to chat and speak after the footy is finished. (Participant 1, Sports center social football)

> But there was a few sat on one table and I was a bit unsure, so I went to the other side and they called across saying "sit here!" you've done it now, you're through the door come on! That was reassuring and just amazing. (Participant 3, village hall breakfast group)

> There's no pressure to partake in any role, but if you want to be a bit more helpful … you can help out loosely, rather than feeling any obligation. (Participant 6, village hall breakfast group)

> It doesn't need the charity trustees, there isn't structure, there aren't rules. It's a bunch of randomly thrown together guys [and] you break into three groups [and] you don't know who you're gonna be sitting with that week. (Participant 4, stadium-based talk group)

Making connections within the space

Many men described the connections made within the spaces, often pointing out the value of male community and friendships. A smaller number of men commented on how some spaces held limited opportunity for deeper connection. In this excerpt Participant 2 reflects on the value they place on connecting with others before and after their game of football:

> I'm not necessarily looking for a load more friends necessarily, but it's really nice to come and like recognize people. It's usually probably 50% of people are the same each week, roughly, so it's nice just to see familiar friendly people and have a chat beforehand and afterwards. (Participant 3, sports center social football)

In this extract Participant 4 recounts how the social connectedness and noncompetitive spirit helped him reconnect with sports:

> Well, I came down because of the people, not because of the football. I've never been [much] into football, now I am. Now I love it because of how welcoming everyone was and how much it felt like the right environment to be in. (Participant 1, sports center social football)

Some men did not fully appreciate the connections they would likely make within the space and were often pleasantly surprised. Here Participant 3 describes his experience of connection at the video games night:

> I would say it's exceeded my expectations I just came down when we I heard about this night. I just thought I'd come for a drink and maybe have a game of whatever, but I've made other social connections just from being here.

In this extract Participant 6 at the village hall breakfast group is clearly pleased with the connections the group has helped him establish:

> That everyone's so positive and such a good sounding board to bounce ideas off just really helps me. I like the fact that there is no activity as such, it's just having a chat, it's perfect for me.

Two men at the public house video games focus group were a little more critical about the space they attended, seeking more connections than the space could offer:

> I find this particular sort of event compared to the other events to be more the superficial, sort of having a laugh rather than building rapport and deep, meaningful connections with people. (Participant 3)

> Occasionally you'll talk to someone and find out that you've got things in common with them and I suppose that bridges the gap between social activities and building rapport. (Participant 5)

Deepening connections in vulnerable spaces

In the stadium-based talk group, participants' narratives revealed a noticeably stronger sense of connectedness compared to other group settings. This group was unique in that it had a specific purpose of facilitating candid, nonpathologizing small-group conversations among men. Reflections from participants suggested the talk group fostered a more profound experience of connection, as illustrated in the following accounts:

> I had to speak and the guys were just listening and I wasn't alone it didn't matter where I'd come from and just to feel like I wasn't alone gave me a base to start building. I started with a lot of trepidation and nerves, but I came out feeling really sort of uplifted and understood. (Participant 2)

> People who've been through a similar journey will know how you're feeling and they've got your back, not in a shallow way that some of your well-meaning mates might have; We in this group know what it's like to be vulnerable with each other. (Participant 3)

> The societal expectations and the weight that's been placed upon us as men is harmful. It's damaging individually and it's damaging to society. The first time I walked in the door I was expecting a bunch of men and instead I saw a bunch of vulnerable human beings who were really talking. I didn't say anything I think pretty much throughout the talking session the first time. [The next time] I just collapsed and I just cried for like 5–10 minutes and just let it all out. (Participant 4)

> There was a CEO, fairly senior guy that just completely "melted" and "died." "That's all right then," I thought, "that means I can." I think I broke down [in the space] having seen that it was so powerful. (Participant 1)

> And it just happens every single time you find the right people are in the right place. I am an utterly rational atheist, and I do not believe in any spirituality whatsoever. But there is something about the group that is when you need somebody, it's that person sitting near you. Well, it's real-world magic … some self-selecting random guys turn up and the magic happens. (Participant 4)

Continuing conversations in online spaces

A final small, but interesting theme originating from the stadium-based focus group was the way in which men described continuing their deeper conversations afterwards and how they were supported through the "hidden" space of an online app. The following excerpts demonstrate both the support and interconnectedness such an app can offer:

> I think every time after a session there's a big conversation in the [social media app] group afterwards about it, saying well done so and so for sharing. And saying that it's been hard and there's just so much support, it's like a military unit, you know that everyone's behind everybody else. (Participant 5)

> You just put a message up [on the social media app] saying that I'm having a **** day or whatever and you know that within minutes there's gonna (sic.) be 34 messages and it's quite often that people will just actually private message you. So, you'll get this random number and it'll be somebody from MenGage. They'll just go "hi, how you doing today?" (Participant 2)

> And then the support is actually wider because it's more than the talking group, there's 200 people plus in the [social media] group. (Participant 3)

Discussion

It is clear men utilizing MenGage public spaces to help support their mental health underwent a number of important experiences. Many men were introduced to the spaces by friends, family or health professionals which highlights the importance of social pathways that mediate help-seeking behavior. Men often feel stigmatized and avoid seeking help from mental health professionals due to their own misconceptions, whilst others are reluctant to seek help for fear of being prescribed psychiatric medication (Clement et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2018).

Multiple participants reported arriving at critical points such as experiencing suicidal ideation, nervous breakdowns, or a having pervasive sense of disconnection before visiting the space, underlining how men often fail to find help in the early stages of mental health problems (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Seidler et al., 2016). Rather than traditional health promotional strategies, the visibility of MenGage appears to rely heavily on word-of-mouth and social prescribing channels. This aligns with broader findings on how men prefer informal, trust-based routes to mental health support (Biddle et al., 2007; Vickery, 2021). The language used by participants, often reflecting desperation or urgency (a "last gasp") emphasizes how these spaces are perceived as essential but unfamiliar options when conventional avenues feel exhausted or unapproachable (Yousaf et al., 2015).

Once men enter MenGage's physical spaces, three environmental attributes become prominent across their narratives: a relaxed atmosphere, a nonjudgmental ethos, and loosely defined leadership structures. The word "relaxed" surfaces repeatedly when participants spoke about football, video games or the

breakfast club and suggests a tacit difference between these and more formal or clinical settings (Oliffe, Rossnagel, et al., 2020). These relaxed environments contribute to a sense of safety, with men expressing comfort in settings that do not enforce rigid agendas, a need to perform, or social comparisons (Galdas et al., 2023; Sharp et al., 2024). Such settings promote agency, allowing participants to "dip in and out" at their own pace whether to talk, observe or simply play games.

As men engage with the spaces, they begin to realize opportunities to both form and reinforce the social ties they encounter. While the specific activity (e.g., football or breakfast) may act as a catalyst, many participants emphasize that the real value lies in the relationships formed with fellow attendees (Tang et al., 2014). The presence of consistent attendees within spaces helps men develop a sense of predictability and social anchoring (Arbes et al., 2014). Though some interactions remain surface-level, light engagement (e.g., casual greetings or small talk) is often enough to help reduce loneliness. However, the degree of social connection varies by group type and individual personality, with hybrid spaces (combining structured activity with informal chat) offering the best environment for natural social interactions (Biddle et al., 2007).

The stadium-based talk space represents a real contrast for MenGage as it seems to function as a place of emotional vulnerability, connection and often, intimate disclosure. Within these small groups, norms of confidentiality and mutual validation enable men to share intensely personal narratives, including suicidal thoughts and emotional breakdowns. This environment fosters a "cascade" effect where an individual's vulnerability legitimizes the emotional expression of his peers (Gough & Novikova, 2020). This group's unique purpose distinguishes it from more recreationally oriented spaces and contributes to the "deeper sense of connectedness" men experience within this group (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, et al., 2018).

Beyond face-to-face interactions, participants indicate the importance of MenGage's private social media app which serves as an ongoing support mechanism after the group ends. The online platform allows members to check in, share difficult moments, and continue conversations between in-person sessions (Shinokawa et al., 2023). This digital dimension facilitates real-time peer support and more community support beyond the public space, further reinforcing group cohesion. The way in which the app is used may help men who feel lonely, isolated or unable to attend the public spaces become more involved in the community and increase their own agency within the larger digital space (Ellis et al., 2012; Naslund et al., 2020).

We believe the strength of MenGage lies in the range of public spaces on offer and the way these spaces provide the support, camaraderie and the sense of male community often lacking in modern-day contexts. We theorize men entering such spaces are more able to "drop their guard" when they encounter other men who are able to genuinely model a more positive masculine demeanor. We believe these types of regular encounters within the spaces may help encourage men to question and challenge aspects of their personality such as stoicism, self-independence, emotional control and lack of vulnerability which prevents them seeking help when their own mental health deteriorates.

Policy implications and recommendations

As previously highlighted, for almost all individual characteristics, there is greater variation among men than between women and men, we feel there may be a number of policy implications emerging from our research which we would like to share. Evidence from both the Literature Review and this Discussion section suggests men's mental health policy provision is in need of serious review. Research has long established the difference between men and women's help seeking and the way in which men tend to manage their mental health through being in peer groups. Female counseling professionals and feminized spaces do not provide the kind of community focused group support men prone to anxiety, depression and suicidality prefer. Globally, we would suggest a shift in policy away from the traditional "one size fits all" approach toward a more distinct male centric model based on community, engagement, camaraderie and connectedness. In the following paragraphs we present our suggestions for policy development in the UK, US and Australia around referral pathways, male friendly mental health spaces, multi-tiered group support, digital peer support platforms and shifting emphasis away from treating men to engaging with them.

Integrating informal referral pathways into policy

We would suggest policymakers recognize the important role informal gatekeepers such as friends, family, work colleagues, sports coaches, and community leaders play in men's mental health referral pathways. In the UK for instance, we would recommend an expansion of the role of social prescribing link workers under the NHS Long Term Plan to include training on male-specific mental health engagement strategies (e.g., recognizing "last gasp" language or crisis indicators) (NHS England, 2025). In Australia policy makers may consider building upon the success of community-focused programs like Men's Sheds and Medicare Mental Health hubs by embedding these community actors into formal stepped-care mental health models (Medicare Mental Health, 2025).

Designing male-friendly mental health spaces

Across all three countries we would suggest governments explore nonclinical, male-affirming public spaces that underline informality and peer interaction, acknowledging that men often reject feminized or clinical environments as incompatible with their identity (Gough & Novikova, 2020; Oliffe, Broom, et al., 2020). These spaces should mirror MenGage's ethos of: no formal intake process, nonjudgmental atmospheres and flexibility in men's participation. Local authority or state-level funding could be used to support public spaces (e.g., from UK Department of Health & Social Care, Australia's Primary Health Networks, or US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services community grants) such as football groups, gaming hubs, breakfast clubs, and other low-threshold entry spaces (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025; Primary Health Networks, 2025; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2025).

Creating multi-tiered group structures for connection and vulnerability

Policymakers should explore funding layered or tiered models of mental health support where men can start with activity-based groups and progress (if they choose) to deeper emotional disclosure forums. In Australia, Movember's Social Innovators Challenge (Movember, 2025) could fund transitions between informal group activities and "talk groups," enabling scalable models that match MenGage's progression structure. In the UK, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2025) should incentivize the formation of "emotional literacy hubs" attached to community sport clubs

Expanding digital peer support platforms

The success of MenGage's private app suggests the potential for policy-supported digital mental health ecosystems that amplify in-person peer networks. The UK and Australia could integrate such platforms into existing infrastructure like Kooth (Coote et al., 2024) or Head to Health (Sturk et al., 2019), ensuring digital options aren't just symptom checkers but community builders. The USA's Crisis Text Line (Gould et al., 2022) could be expanded with optional forums or group chats aimed specifically at men, normalizing online emotional expression. Along with these suggestions privacy and confidentiality protections must be at the forefront of any policy in the digital arena to ensure trust for vulnerable personal sharing.

Conclusion

This research asked "What are the experiences of men utilizing public spaces to help support their mental health?" and explored four quite unique public spaces offered by the UK charity MenGage. Men entered the spaces via social pathways at critical junctures in their mental health. Relaxed, nonjudgmental environments and flexible leadership helped foster feelings of safety, enabling men to form meaningful connections through shared activities. While recreational groups reduced loneliness through casual interactions, talk groups promoted deeper experiences of vulnerability, amplifying emotional connectedness. Our work helps illustrate an emergent model of male-centric mental health support

developed around notions of community, engagement and belonging. Policymakers would serve men well by considering a shift from clinical frameworks to the endorsement of informal referral pathways, funded male-friendly communal spaces, multi-tiered group structures and integrated digital peer platforms. By reframing support around holistic engagement and connectedness rather than treatment uptake, policymakers can address men's unique help-seeking preferences and improve their currently poor mental health outcomes.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is the community model of engaging vulnerable men in public spaces seems to have a number of benefits as discussed above. Men seem to like the company of other men and are keen to explore areas of their mental health on their own terms, in venues they feel safest in. It is important to state that although the findings within the study are largely positive, the sample size is quite small. This has implications on how much weight we may give to our findings and recommendations, particularly as the group we interviewed were predominantly white, British with an average age of around 42 years old. We would recommend future research be carried out with men of different ages, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This would help us establish if the barriers to this type of service within a larger cultural and socio-demographic.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Gary Shepherd**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Holly Murphy**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing; **Jack Woodhams**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Sam Watling**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Validation, Writing – original draft.

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