

# A Stiff Upper Lip Is Killing British Men, JACK URWIN

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**Talk about what's on your mind and it could end up saving your life.**

A traumatic event in one's childhood is capable of inspiring exactly three things: shitty debut novels; self-absorbed blog posts; and dark jokes that make your friends feel weird around you. For example, here's a pretty funny story about the last conversation I had with my father, who'd been off work with flu for a couple of weeks.

"How are you feeling, dad?" I asked.

"Better," he replied, as he stood up and made his way to the bathroom to die.

A big part of me hopes that, vision fading and lips turning blue, my father's final thought before submitting to the cold grip of extinction was a gleeful: 'Haha, I got you, you little shit.' Because if that final word really was the last in his lifetime of unwavering sarcasm, it was – for my money – the single greatest burn I've ever heard.

Three weeks later, I celebrated my 10th birthday. A few months after that, I took home the title of "funniest pupil" in a classroom awards ceremony. Deflecting my grief into something that made others laugh felt much better than breaking down crying several times a day – which, in reality, was what I wanted and probably needed to do. You latch onto any kind of positivity after something so painful, and I suppose I found validation in the laughter of my peers. Plus, let's face it, no one wants to be the kid constantly crying about their dead dad; that guy is always a total fucking buzzkill.

When the coroner was finished rooting around inside the vessel that had, for 51 years, housed my one-time Mensa member father (he was too tight to renew his subscription after the first year), a fatal heart attack was recorded, and off went dad to his fiery conclusion in the Loughborough crematorium. But the post-mortem also revealed significant scar tissue indicative of a previous attack sometime in the months or years previously, which was news to us all.

Apparently near-fatal chest pains weren't something that he deemed worthy of professional consultation. Classic dad! After he died, jokes took preference over sincerity in almost any situation, because the idea of picking at wounds and revealing the fragile human beneath was about the most terrifying thing I could comprehend. It's a trait I now recognise as one of my father's greatest flaws, ultimately contributing to his downfall. It's also an inherent characteristic of so many men.

The stubborn lost-husband-refusing-to-ask-for-directions might be a handy caricature – one that's helped people like Martin Clunes sustain a career in television for over 30 years – but it's also rooted in a very real, very destructive notion of masculinity. We're conditioned from an early age to believe that acknowledging weakness is somehow a

weakness in itself, and there are plenty of depressing statistics to confirm what a huge problem this is.

Even accounting for reproductive health, in any given year men are half as likely as women to visit their GP, which doesn't make a lot of sense: I'm pretty certain women don't get ill twice as often as men. In the UK, the rate of premature deaths (under 50 years old) is one and a half times higher among men than women, primarily due to cardiovascular disease, accidents, suicide and cancer – that latter cause offering perhaps the strongest evidence of men's reluctance to seek help. For example, while affecting men and women equally, skin cancer kills four times as many men because we avoid addressing the issue until it's too late.

This month's "Feeling Nuts" initiative is encouraging male social media users to post selfies where they're grabbing their own crotch. Raising awareness of testicular cancer is clearly a noble intention, but I can't help but feel it's playing into awareness as a public spectacle, rather than being something that will truly impact how men deal with their worries. Spencer Matthews posting a cheeky nutsack selfie might earn him a mention on the Mail Online, but how likely is it to spark conversation in the pub? The truth is, many of us are too afraid to even admit our feelings to ourselves, let alone others. We're terrified of talking, and it's killing us.

The disparity in suicide rates is another eye-opener. In spite of depression being more common in women, British men are three times more likely to take their own lives. A 2012 Samaritans report concluded that the social constructs of masculinity were a major cause of this imbalance, noting that "the way men are taught, through childhood, to be 'manly' does not emphasise social and emotional skills", and that, in contrast to women, "the 'healthy' ways men cope are using music or exercise to manage stress or worry, rather than 'talking'".

Alcoholism is also significantly more prevalent in men, linked largely to self-medicating mental illness. My paternal grandfather fought at Normandy and survived by technicality alone, the untold horrors he'd seen gouging away at his sanity until he was able to do little else but drink. Born six years after D-Day, my dad grew up like so many baby-boomers, with a father whose deep emotional repression left him unable to love, let alone talk about any of his feelings. It's a hereditary condition; men raised by men unable to communicate emotionally, the symptoms of what we now know as PTSD becoming synonymous with

masculinity. Which is wildly fucked up when you stop to consider it.

Of course, the destruction doesn't end there. While widowed mothers deal with the fallout of our distrust for doctors, men are doing a terrific job of sabotaging any attempt at romance in the first place because of our inability to communicate.

Not content with merely reliving my father's death for this piece, I came up with the definitely-not-terrible idea of asking my ex-girlfriend Megan to reveal the specific problems that arose during my tenure as her shitty boyfriend.

"I think the biggest thing was that your lack of communication made it difficult to process your emotions within your own self," she said. "Even more than your inability to communicate it to me, you were so practiced at pushing things down that you'd lost touch with the reality of your emotions. So even when I could identify a problematic situation, you would deny it. In addition to having to work through difficult issues, I first had an insurmountable task of getting you to acknowledge they were issues in the first place."

**"UNTIL WE ADDRESS OUR INABILITY TO OPEN UP, WE'LL CONTINUE TO DIE EARLY AND NEEDLESSLY"**

Communication is the key to a successful relationship, as any happily married person will tell you (also, not sleeping with your colleagues; that helps, too). The worst part is, we *know* this. It's been drilled into us by every book and TV

show and film that deals with these kind of issues. But still we ignore it, forging ahead under the misconception that those rules only apply to others.

So what can we do? It's easy to write the problem off as a lost cause, too embedded in our culture to ever truly change. You can't alter the personality of half the world's population overnight – and thankfully so, as there's a lot to be said for self-deprecation, cynicism and low-level passive-aggression. But you can always start trying by doing one simple thing: talking. We do it every day, so why not do it when it comes to stuff that really matters? You've had a lot of practice opening and closing your mouth to make sound come out of it; just slightly alter those sounds and it could end up doing you a lot of good. If he'd learned to open up a bit more, maybe my dad wouldn't have spent his life avoiding help and would still be here. To think, he could have spared the world yet another gratuitously self-indulgent piece penned by a millennial about an emotionally distant late father, and I'd have someone to mutter at me disapprovingly every time I mentioned how my career and housing situation and life was going.

Hypotheticals will get us nowhere, but until we address our inability to open up, we'll continue to die early and needlessly, as well as destroying the relationships we have while we're here.

So please: start talking. I don't want to have to write a whole book about this stuff.