

# HeadsUpGuys: An E-Mental Health Resource for Men with Depression

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## INTRODUCTION

Often referred to as a “silent crisis”, the persistently high rate of male suicide – one of the leading causes of death for men under the age of 50 – is beginning to gain much-needed attention.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite this, there remains uncertainty about how suicide among men should be tackled. One of the strongest risk factors for suicide is depression,<sup>2</sup> positioning it as a likely upstream target for male suicide-prevention strategies. However, evidence points to men's reluctance to seek professional help for mental-health concerns, including depression.<sup>3</sup>

Psychological help-seeking has long been understood as transgressing prevailing masculine ideals, including strength, self-reliance, and stoicism.<sup>3,4</sup> Concerns about stigma associated with being known to need mental health care services also stand as a significant barrier to ‘in person’ help-seeking for men who experience depression.<sup>5</sup> Considering the profound social and economic burden of untreated depression in men and globally high male suicide rates, there is an urgent need to develop resources tailored more specifically to men, and responsive to their needs, as a means to better engage them in their own mental health and with professional services when needed.<sup>6-8</sup>

Rapid growth in the area of eHealth represents a new frontier for delivering tailored interventions to men.<sup>9,10</sup> Research has reported that young men in particular have a strong preference for web-based health information and interventions.<sup>11,12</sup> Various eHealth programs tailored to men have been developed to address prostate cancer, smoking cessation, prenatal health education, weight loss, sexual health, fathering, and health behaviours.<sup>13-19</sup> However, there has been little development of eHealth programs specifically oriented to men with depression, despite eHealth interventions for depression showing promise.<sup>20-23</sup> Attending to this gap, Cheng and colleagues advocate for further development of targeted eHealth initiatives proactively aimed at men to advance their mental health management and engagement with health services.<sup>24,25</sup>

## HEADSUPGUYS: A MEN'S DEPRESSION E-MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE

Building on the promise of eHealth resources for providing men anonymity in accessing information about depression, a team of researchers, clinicians, and mental health

advocates developed the HeadsUpGuys website (headsupguys.org).<sup>26</sup> Following a comprehensive development process that involved environmental scans, surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews of men with lived experience of depression and suicidality, this free online resource was launched in June 2015, offering men information, practical tips, and guidance for managing and recovering from depression. The resource provides a male-friendly medium through which to start the help-seeking process. It was designed to appeal to men's desire for independence, autonomy, and inclination for self-sufficiency, while also building in messaging to norm and affirm men's connections to peer and/or professional help. By building a ladder approach (i.e., moving from self-sufficiency to engaging with others for help) that normalizes help-seeking, HeadsUpGuys worked to bridge men's tendency to self-manage their mental health<sup>27</sup> with augmenting and/or directing to more formal care resources. The language used on the site is purposefully commonplace, rather than technical/medically-oriented, in order to make the material on the site accessible and digestible to a wide range of visitors, and positions effective self-management and help-seeking as manly strengths and normative values.

## FEATURES OF HEADSUPGUYS

The HeadsUpGuys website is organized into four main sections: 1) Depression in Men; 2) Take Action; 3) Articles; and 4) For Friends and Family. The ‘Depression in Men’ section contains information about depression and suicide, including potential risk factors and triggers, as well as common misconceptions about depression among men (e.g., depression is a sign of personal weakness). It also includes a self-check screening tool for depression, with directives for action when the user is provided with the screening score results. The HeadsUpGuys Self Check (**Box 1**) is a web-based interactive version of the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9),<sup>28</sup> a validated self-report measure of depressive symptomatology representing the nine DSM-5 criteria for major depressive disorder.<sup>29</sup> The PHQ-9 has been used extensively across diverse research and clinical contexts. Another important feature of the ‘Depression in Men’ section is the HeadsUpGuys Stress Test, a proprietary tool developed specifically for the website (**Box 2**). The purpose of the Stress Test is to get visitors to reflect on diverse aspects

**Box 1. HeadsUpGuys Self Check**

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3
Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
Feeling bad about yourself – or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	0	1	2	3
Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite – being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way	0	1	2	3

**Box 2. HeadsUpGuys Stress Test**

List of stressors included in the Stress Test:

Personal illness or injury	Difficulties at work
Illness or injury of close family member	Difficulties at school
Loss of social status	Separation or divorce
Difficulties with alcohol, tobacco, cannabis or other substance use	Issues with sexual performance
Retirement	Death of a pet
Loneliness	Death of a spouse
Lack of purpose or meaning in life	Death of a loved one (family member, close friend)
Loss of employment	Being bullied or cyberbullied
Financial strain	Relationship problems with spouse/romantic partner
Move to a new neighbourhood	Birth of a child/adoption of a new child
	Other

**Stress Test item ratings:**

Over what period of has this stressor been affecting you? [duration]  
 Week    Month    Several Months    Year    Multiple Years

How intense is the stress caused by this issue? [intensity]  
 Minimally stressful    1    2    3    4    5    Extremely stressful

How well are you able to manage this stress? [manageability]  
 Not managing at all    1    2    3    4    5    Managing very well

of their lives that may be contributing to their depression or may be impacted by their depression. The Stress Test covers 20 different stressors for which users rate the intensity of the stressor, duration of the stressor, and perceived capacity to manage the stressor. Directives for action are provided to users along with their Stress Test scores.

The 'Take Action' section of the site provides visitors with practical tips for self-management, focusing on the topics of sleep, stress management, social life, physical activity, food, and sex and relationships. Also included is clear messaging about engaging the help of others to "build your team" that can support one's recovery from depression. To help guide men's engagement with support resources, the 'Take Action' section includes advice on how to reach out to others, including friends, family, and health professionals; information about health and crisis lines that men can reach out to for help; who to contact if a crisis (i.e., heightened suicide risk) arises; and information about professional services, including psychotherapy, medications, and inpatient services. A recent addition to the 'Take Action' section is the HeadsUpGuys Therapist Directory, which includes listings to therapists in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Ireland, and provides a mechanism for visitors to the site to connect with professional support.

The 'Articles' section, as the names implies, is where visitors to the site can find articles on a wide variety of topics related to depression and suicide. The articles are brief, informative, often directive, and as much as possible, attempt to leave the reader with actionable 'next steps'. Examples of such articles are: "How to reframe negative thoughts", "Managing depression with the help of meditation", and "How journaling can help combat depression". In addition to such 'tip' articles, the section also includes a large number of real story blogs and videos from men who share their journeys of struggling with and recovering from depression. The real story blogs and videos also are geared toward providing the reader/viewer with practical guidance around strategies for recovering from depression and living well. Also included in the 'Articles' section is a repository of campaign articles, pieces that focus on topics around which HeadsUpGuys' three yearly campaigns are shaped.

The final section of the site, 'For Friends and Family', speaks to those who are providing support to a man who is dealing with depression. Recognizing that these supporters play a crucial role in a man's recovery from depression, the section provides guidance around how to a) have an initial conversation to share one's concerns, b) provide ongoing support, c) manage suicide risk, and d) take care of oneself while in a supporting role.

HeadsUpGuys also makes use of various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn), as well as hosting a YouTube channel, to encourage user engagement.

## USER ENGAGEMENT

Since launching in June 2015, HeadsUpGuys has had a total of 2,629,988 users (as of March 16, 2022), amounting to 3,079,576 sessions (i.e., website visits) and 5,210,800 pageviews (Figure 1). Figure 2 illustrates the change in number of sessions since launch, revealing a progressive increase in site traffic; however, the clear increasing trajectory was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Organic traffic accounts for the highest proportion (49.95%;  $n = 1,538,326$ ) of all website sessions. Users of the HeadsUpGuys website come from many places across the world, but three countries (United States, United Kingdom, Canada) account for over two-thirds (69.20%;  $n = 2,131,186$  visitors) of the website traffic. The United States alone provides just over a quarter (27.22%;  $n = 838,383$  visitors) of traffic to the site.

Figure 1. HeadsUpGuys overview presented in Google Analytics

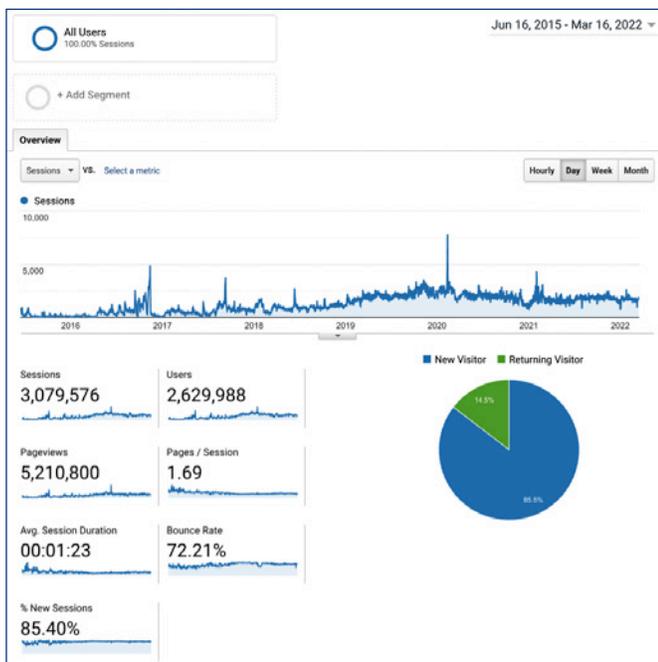
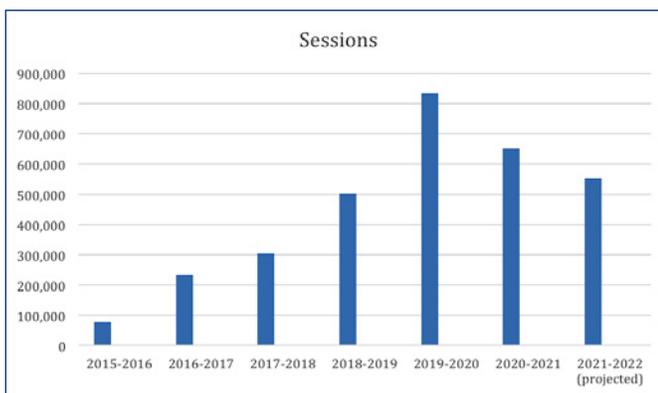


Figure 2. Sessions by year



The top pages by page views are listed in Table 1. The Self Check page receives the most page views (17.90% of all page views;  $n = 932,929$ ). The second most viewed page (14.80%;  $n = 770,982$ ) is the home page. Among the top 10 pages, three are articles (Five Steps to Overcoming Suicidal Thoughts; Marijuana and Depression; I Never Wanted to Die, I Only Wanted to End My Pain). Table 2 presents the top 10 queries from Google searches (November 20, 2020–March 16, 2022; the longest period of time that Google makes search data available) that brings users to the website. Three of the top 10 queries relate to suicidality. Among these, the query “my boyfriend is suicidal” had the highest search position (3.82) and the highest click through rate (29.41%).

A total of 397,566 Self Checks have been completed. Currently, the Self Check receives an average of 162 submissions per day. Table 3 presents the distribution of Self Check scores according to the PHQ-9 scoring instructions developed by Kroenke and colleagues,<sup>28</sup> revealing that 78.7% ( $n = 312,772$ ) of Self Check completions scored above the threshold for moderate depression. For item 9 (the suicidality item), 58.0% of Self Check completers ( $n = 230,458$ ) scored above 0, indicating at least some suicidal ideation, with 17.7% ( $n = 70,338$ ) indicating suicidal ideation nearly every day.

The Stress Test, a feature added in February 2019, was completed 71,597 times. Since the launch of the Stress Test, it has received an average of 67 submissions per day. Figure 3 reports the five most frequently endorsed stressors by visitors who completed the Stress Test, revealing that lack of purpose or meaning in life and loneliness as the two stressors that were endorsed by more than half the Stress Test completers.

## CONCLUSION

Considering men's low uptake of in-person mental health services and the increased risk of suicide among men with untreated depression, it is imperative to establish alternate avenues of engagement, especially for those men who might be isolated from other sources of support in their daily lives.<sup>20</sup> Despite the growth of eHealth programs to serve men, there has been minimal focus on developing eHealth programs specifically for men with depression. HeadsUpGuys was developed to help fill this gap.

A review of HeadsUpGuys' engagement metrics reveals a high and rising volume of users and global reach. Organic search traffic accounted for half of all website sessions. The most obvious benefit of organic search traffic is a cost advantage, in that there are no direct acquisition costs for these visitors. The high organic search traffic also testifies to the growing credibility of HeadsUpGuys as a reliable mental health resource.

With regard to the Self Check, besides providing users with a score and prompts for action, it was also used as an

**Table 1.** Top 10 pages by pageviews

	Page	Pageviews <sup>a</sup>	Unique Pageviews <sup>b</sup>	Avg. Time on Page <sup>c</sup>	Entrances <sup>d</sup>	Bounce Rate <sup>e</sup>	Exit % <sup>f</sup>
1.	Self Check	932,929	809,792	0:02:49	590,219	68.10%	62.19%
2.	Homepage	770,982	641,194	0:01:11	619,543	48.79%	50.74%
3.	Five Steps to Overcoming Suicidal Thoughts	337,324	313,830	0:03:16	300,048	84.86%	83.99%
4.	Depression in Men: Symptoms	307,830	274,850	0:02:06	142,374	73.28%	55.49%
5.	Marijuana and Depression	170,779	162,586	0:05:14	160,888	89.47%	92.21%
6.	Stress Test	161,278	137,680	0:04:16	17,396	74.97%	51.93%
7.	Depression in Men	155,052	128,019	0:01:10	62,102	49.36%	36.07%
8.	Practical Tips	148,372	107,195	0:00:26	12,141	55.81%	17.91%
9.	22 Male Athletes Speaking Out About Depression	129,134	122,249	0:04:51	121,511	89.54%	90.59%
10.	"I never wanted to die, I only wanted to end my pain."	127,901	118,272	0:08:21	117,024	85.20%	90.44%

a Pageviews: Number of times a page from the website is loaded (or reloaded) in a user's browser (one user visiting a page multiple times, will result in multiple pageviews).

b Unique pageviews: Number of pageviews by unique users to the site (one user visiting the same page multiple times, will result in one unique pageview).

c Avg. Time on Page: The average amount of time a session lasts on a page, before the user switches to another page.

d Entrances: Number of times a user's session begins on a page.

e Bounce rate: The percentage of single-page sessions a page received (the percentage of visits to the site, where a user leaves from the same page they entered on, without visiting another page, or triggering an event such as a form submission).

f Exit %: The percentage of users who left the website from a page (the last page visited by a user, before they leave the website).

**Table 2.** Google search traffic: Top queries ranked by clicks

Query	Impressions <sup>a</sup>	Clicks <sup>b</sup>	Click through rate <sup>c</sup>	Position <sup>d</sup>
heads up guys	9695	71.15%	1.09	9695
heads up guys	8958	71.14%	1.09	8958
how to stop suicidal thoughts	51398	4.77%	9.18	51398
my boyfriend is suicidal	4985	29.41%	3.82	4985
how to overcome suicidal thoughts	7542	12.60%	6.71	7542
how to improve social life	3966	22.87%	1.54	3966
how to have a social life	4250	20.92%	1.09	4250
how to improve your social life	3598	24.54%	1.65	3598
bryan jackson	13934	6.18%	4.93	13934
social life	158713	0.52%	9.52	158713

a Impressions: Number of times any URL from the site appears in Google Search results, viewed by a user (not including from paid ads).

b Clicks: Number of clicks on a URL from the site, appearing on Google Search results page (not including from paid ads).

c Click through rate: The proportion of clicks received per impressions.

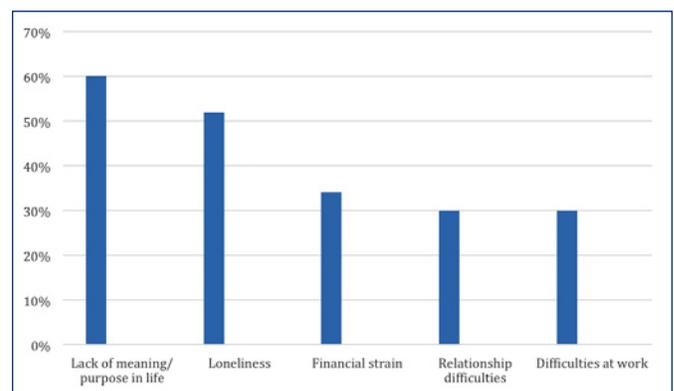
d Position: The average ranking of the website's URLs for the search terms (with 1 being the first website listed at the top search results).

**Table 3.** Distribution of Self Check (PHQ-9) scores\* (n = 397,566)

Self Check score	N	Percentage
0	1,938	0.5%
1–4 Minimal depression	17,634	4.4%
5–9 Mild depression	65,222	16.4%
10–14 Moderate depression	98,264	24.7%
15–19 Moderately severe depression	108,072	27.2%
20–27 Severe depression	106,436	26.8%

\* According to PHQ-9 scoring instructions (Kroenke et al., 2001).

**Figure 3.** Most frequently endorsed stressors from Stress Test (n = 71,597)



opportunity to inform visitors of the symptoms of depression and, in this way, help improve their mental health literacy around depression, further contributing to the usefulness of this particular website feature. Of the nearly 400,000 Self Check completions, almost 80% scored above the threshold for moderate depression, providing strong evidence that the site was drawing in those from its intended audience (i.e., men experiencing depression). Additionally, more than half of the Self Check completers endorsed at least some suicidal ideation, which resonates with the findings of suicide-related pages being among the most visited on the site and with suicidality featuring prominently in the organic search traffic. Though the Stress Test was a relatively new feature of the site, findings indicated good engagement. The Stress Test results are also revealing, with lack of purpose or meaning in life and loneliness emerging as significant stressors for more than half of the men who complete it.

That there are no commercial interests underpinning HeadsUpGuys reinforces the attraction of authentic conversations to catalyze men's informed self-management. This is especially important in the context of men's mental health in which self-reliance preferences can be satiated by encouraging men to consider, choose, and build upon a variety of health-advancing strategies. The success of HeadsUpGuys may help rewrite (and perhaps overwrite) the long-standing tropes regarding men's reticence for seeking mental health care in pointing to robust growth and engagement. Retelling this narrative in and of itself norms men's eHealth help-seeking to proactively reconsider where and how men engage mental health resources.<sup>30</sup>

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None

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