

## Early Intervention Project for Men with Mental Health Problems: A Stepped-Care Model

Catherine K Y Lee    Benson K K Chan

Jockey Club Men's Space  
The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong

### *Abstract*

*The Jockey Club Men's Space is a 3-year mental health project that aims to provide prevention, early intervention, and advocacy for men with mental health issues in Hong Kong. The project's main two focuses are monthly programs and mental health services. The mental health services follow a stepped-care model, which sorts the target population into corresponding services based on the risk levels and needs and are categorized into online self-learning, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy treatment groups, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy individual counseling. Data is collected throughout the 3-year project to provide more insights and understanding of mental health issues among men in Hong Kong as well as an evaluative tool for the project's effectiveness. This paper reports an analysis of the initial data collected.*

*Over 1,800 PHQ-4 responses were collected and analyzed during the initial data collection phase. Qualitative data regarding men's presenting problems, stressors, and help-seeking behaviors is also collected. Results showed that close to 60% of the respondents were middle-aged men ranging from 35-54, and about one-third of the respondents were categorized as experiencing moderate to severe levels of depression and anxiety features. Regarding help-seeking behaviors, 63% of the respondents said they would not seek professional help when needed. Some common stressors among men include work-related stress, family and marital issues, and interpersonal problems.*

*Based on the findings, the project found that middle-aged men are more vulnerable to emotional disturbances than other age ranges. The reasons behind the low help-seeking behaviors include inaccessibility to resources, lack of knowledge, and the societal stigma of mental illness and gender role expectations. JC Men's Space strives to be a pioneer project to promote public mental health awareness and literacy, improve overall mental wellness for our target population, and provide psychoeducation, protocols, and guidelines to fellow mental health professionals as a reference framework for men in future clinical applications.*

*Keywords: mental health, ACT, CBT, stepped-care model, PHQ-4*

### **Introduction**

According to the World Health Organization, there are 970 million individuals who struggle with mental disorders or neurological disorders all over

the world, equaling approximately 1 in every eight individuals in the world (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). The most common mental disorders are emotional disturbances, including depression disorders and anxiety disorders. In Hong Kong, the

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ms. Catherine Lee, Unit F, 8/F., King Palace Plaza, 55 King Yip Street, Kwun Tong, Kowloon.  
Email: kylee@mhahk.org.hk

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Hong Kong Mental Morbidity Survey (HKMMS; Lam et al., 2015) interviewed over 5000 individuals aged between 16 and 75 and revealed that the prevalence of a common mental disorder is 13.3% (1 in every seven individuals), which is a similar finding compared to the global level.

Though people are more aware of mental disorders, there are still undoubtedly a large number of individuals who are not familiar with any mental health issues, including stressors, early red flags, symptoms, and impairments. A study revealed that poor knowledge of mental health symptoms is a significant barrier to interventions (Fung et al., 2021). The study also concluded that males were associated with lower knowledge of overall mental health symptoms, which, in turn, related to higher reluctance to help-seeking behaviors.

### Jockey Club Men's Space

The Jockey Club (JC) Men's Space is a 3-year mental health project under The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong (MHAHK), funded by the Jockey Club Charity Trust. The pioneering project aims to provide prevention, early intervention, and advocacy for men with mental health issues in Hong Kong. The target population is men over 18 who currently reside in Hong Kong and struggle with life changes and different concerns that lead to stress, emotional and behavioral disturbances.

The JC Men's Space project aims to promote public mental health awareness and literacy, improve overall mental wellness for our target population, and provide psychoeducation, protocols, and guidelines to fellow mental health professionals as a reference framework for men in future clinical applications. The

project's main two focuses are monthly programs and mental health services. The monthly programs include workshops, psychoeducational talks, and seminars on various men-related topics. The mental health services follow a stepped-care model, which sorts the target population into corresponding services based on the risk levels and needs.

### Mental Health Services: A Stepped-Care Model

A stepped-care model delivers and monitors mental health interventions so that the most effective yet least intensive intervention is delivered first and only "stepping up" to the subsequent intervention as needed, depending on the risk and needs level. This system ensures the project reaches a broad population across communities in Hong Kong and, at the same time, adequately allocates resources and services to match service users' individual needs.

The first level of the stepped-care model, a launched mobile app, is designed to provide online self-learning courses. This is followed by the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) treatment group and, subsequently, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for individual counseling. To reach a wider population, participants are recruited through multiple modalities, such as social media platforms and advertisements. Interested individuals will be administered the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4) to assess their risks of depression and anxiety and their needs for mental health services. They will then be classified into three different levels of services according to their PHQ scores (0-2 as normal to mild level of psychological distress 3-8 as mild to moderate level; and 9-12 as moderate to high level), ensuring they receive the most appropriate level of care (see Figure 1).

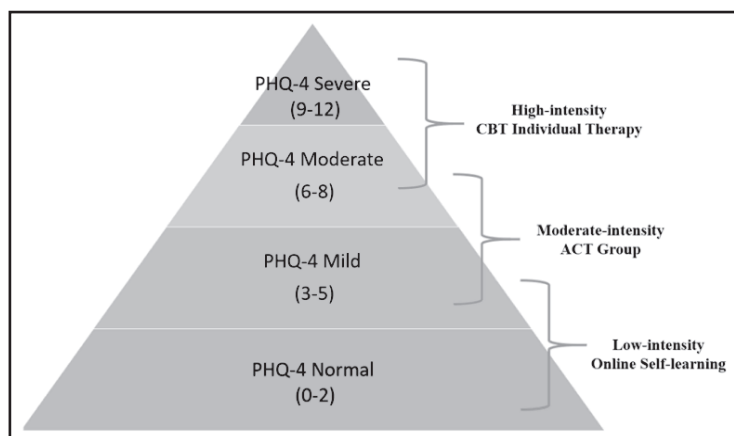


Figure 1: A Stepped-Care Model for Men with Mental Health Concerns

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For the first level of service, individuals who scored 0-2 on the PHQ-4 will be guided to install a mobile app for low-intensity self-learning courses. These learning courses, developed based on the cognitive behavioral therapy framework, focus on anxiety, depression, and anger management triggered by various life stressors, including health issues, work stress, and family conflicts. Delivered through educational videos and reading materials, participants can select one of the three videos (or all) based on their needs and concerns. Participants who completed these self-learning courses are expected to gain better insights into mental health issues among men, providing them with a solid foundation for well-being.

For the second level, individuals who scored 3-8 on PHQ-4 are recommended to attend a moderate-intensity intervention, the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) treatment group. ACT is a type of psychotherapy based on values and actions to help individuals accept and manage difficult thoughts and feelings rather than trying to avoid or control them (Hayes et al., 2006). ACT has been found effective in improving mental health conditions and increasing overall life satisfaction (Gloster et al., 2020). The intervention consists of 4 weekly face-to-face sessions delivered by a trained mental health professional in a closed-group format. Participants who completed the ACT group are expected to have increased psychological flexibility and decreased emotional distress.

For the third level, individuals who scored 9-12 are recommended to receive high-intensity intervention, individual Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) counseling. This CBT intervention entails 6-8 individual face-to-face sessions delivered by a trained mental health professional. Based on the CBT model, it aims to reduce depressive and anxiety symptoms, utilize adaptive coping skills, and improve overall well-being. Participants are encouraged to meet with the provider every month and to review assigned work regularly, such as psychoeducational materials, automatic thought records, and cognitive restructuring. Participants are expected to have reduced maladaptive thoughts and cognitive distortions and to develop healthy and constructive coping skills upon completion of the intervention. This paper reports the initial data analysis of the JC Men's Space project.

### Data Collection Process

Data collection and analyses are integrated into the project as part of the commitment to evidence-

based practices and continuous improvement. Over the course of the 3-year project, data is collected and analyzed for multiple purposes. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of the mental health issues among men in Hong Kong. Second, it offers mental health professionals an in-depth understanding of mental health issues. Lastly, it is a robust outcome evaluation of the project's effectiveness and proficiency, ensuring that the interventions provided meet our target population's needs.

Largely, all individuals recruited through various inquiries were asked to complete a brief screening tool, the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4), to collect quantitative data. PHQ-4 is a commonly used screening tool in outpatient settings and among the general population that shows high reliability and validity (Kroenke et al., 2009). The criteria in the PHQ-4 are related to features of depression and anxiety, and the higher scores denote greater levels of depression and anxiety (Ghaheri et al., 2020). During the first phase of the data collection process (Dec 2022 – Sep 2023), over 1800 PHQ-4 responses were collected and analyzed.

Moreover, individuals who signed up for interventions (ACT group and CBT counseling) were interviewed, and qualitative data was collected. The qualitative data provided an in-depth understanding of mental health and psychological aspects related to men's mental health issues, such as stressors, presenting problems, and help-seeking behaviors.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethics are central to research and clinical practice and should be vigorously addressed. Prior to implementing the JC Men's Space project, ethics approval was obtained from The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong.

This project strives to provide quality services that abide by the standard of care in professional clinical practice. The clinical team, including the clinical psychologist and social workers, are trained mental health professionals in respective fields who operate under corresponding scopes of practice. Clinical staff should receive continuing education and training to equip them with up-to-date clinical skills such as the recovery model, ACT training workshops, clinical documentation skills, etc. Informed consent is strictly implemented in all clinical services that clearly state the description of service, rights to decline or withdraw, and limits of confidentiality. All

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informed consents are explained to participants and obtained before the beginning of services.

All clinical documents, including participants' demographics, assessments, case recordings, and related records, are secured in locked cabinets and password-protected computers to ensure confidentiality. Standard procedures are also implemented for risk management and crisis interventions. Proper referrals will be made when a higher level of services or other appropriate interventions are needed. Lastly, an advisory team of professionals from respective fields regularly meets with the project staff to offer insights, strategic thinking, and advice.

### Results

Both demographic and descriptive data were collected and analyzed. Among the 1,809 PHQ-4 responses, close to 60% were from middle-aged men ranging from 35 to 54. There were 15% of responses from 25 to 34, 18% from 55 to 64, only 4% from 18 to 24, and 6% from above 65 (see Table 1). All respondents were Chinese males residing in Hong Kong.

45% of respondents fell within the PHQ-4 normal category (scored 0-2); 24% fell within the mild category (scored 3-5); 22% fell within the moderate category (scored 6-8); and 9% fell within the severe category (scored 9-12) (see Table 2). To summarize, about one-third of the responses were categorized as experiencing moderate to severe levels of psychological distress including depression and anxiety features. For the subscales of depression and anxiety, respondents who scored above three on the anxiety subscale were 34%, whereas those who scored above three on the depression subscale were 27%.

Furthermore, regarding help-seeking behaviors, 63% of the respondents expressed that they would not seek professional help when needed, and reasons behind their unwillingness to seek help were also interviewed (see Figure 2). In terms of stressors of their emotional disturbances, respondents were asked to identify stressors related to their presenting problems and could select up to 3 choices. 35% were work-related, 21% were due to family and marital issues, 17% were due to interpersonal issues, 13% were due to finances, 8% were due to child-rearing issues, 4% were health-related, and 2% were due to other stressors (see Table 3).

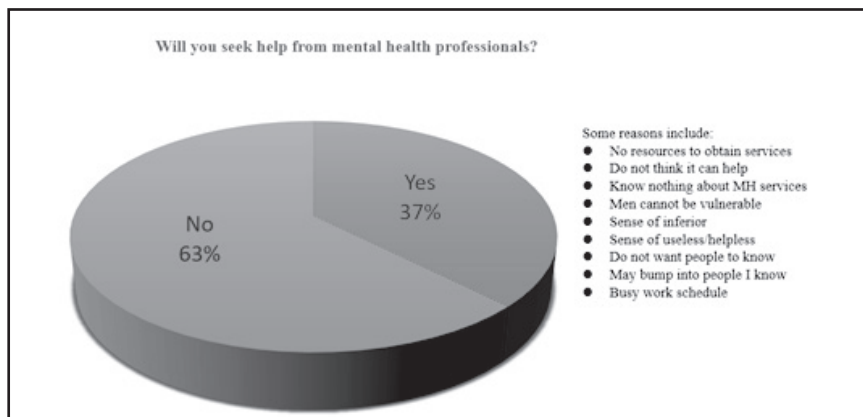
**Table 1.**  
**Age Compositions among Men (N=1,809)**

Age range	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
18-24	72	4
25-34	271	15
35-44	525	29
45-54	506	28
55-64	326	18
65 and above	109	6

**Table 2.**  
**Scores on PHQ-4 (N=1,809)**

PHQ-4 level	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
Normal (0-2)	820	45
Mild (3-5)	437	24
Moderate (6-8)	397	22
Severe (9-12)	155	9

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**Figure 2: Help-seeking behaviors**

**Table 3.  
Stressors for Presenting Problems in Males**

Stressors	Percent (%)
Work	35
Family and Marital	21
Interpersonal	17
Finances	13
Child-rearing	8
Health	4
Others	2

### Discussions

The aim of the JC Men’s Space project is to provide prevention, early intervention, and advocacy for men with mental health issues in Hong Kong. Some significant trends were observed from the initial data collection and analysis phase. First, over 60% of respondents who have experienced emotional disturbances were middle-aged men ranging from 35 to 54. This indicates that midlife is a benchmark where individuals are more vulnerable to stress and emotional disturbances than other age ranges. One possible reason is that middle age represents a stage in life with many crucial transitions. Deterioration in physical abilities and emerging health problems; changes in the family unit, including getting married/divorced, having new-born and raising children, and the experience of deaths of older family members are all risk factors for mental health issues. Another reason is that most middle-aged men are the household’s primary breadwinners, which imposes

inevitable stress related to work and finances (Fung et al., 2021). Any references to support the discussion?

Additionally, those who expressed that they would not seek professional help amid emotional disturbances were further interviewed for the reasons or barriers behind them. Some reasons encountered for the low help-seeking behavior include the lack of mental health knowledge (inability to identify early red flags or symptoms), inaccessibility to resources (services provided by governmental agencies or NGOs), and societal stigma of mental illness and gender stereotypes. Notably, respondents possessed a perception that help-seeking in men is a sign of weakness and vulnerability, contradicting the traditional stereotypes that men are expected to be tough, masculine, and independent (Fung et al., 2021).

This paper reports the preliminary findings and observations of the initial phase of the JC Men’s Space project. Subsequent data collected after the

implementation of interventions will be analyzed further.

### Implications to the Social Services in Hong Kong

The findings from the JC Men's Space project carry significant implications for social services in Hong Kong, particularly concerning mental health support for men. Firstly, it highlights a critical need for mental health awareness and education, particularly among middle-aged men. The data indicates that a substantial proportion of middle-aged men are unaware of the symptoms of mental health issues and the importance of seeking help. Social services should focus on developing and implementing comprehensive educational programs that target men, especially those in the 35-54 age range. These programs could include community workshops, online resources, and collaboration with workplaces to disseminate information about mental health symptoms, the benefits of early intervention, and available support services. By improving mental health literacy, social services can empower men to recognize early signs of mental health issues and seek appropriate help promptly.

Secondly, the findings reveal that many men face barriers to accessing mental health services, including inaccessibility and a lack of knowledge about available resources. To address this, social services must enhance the accessibility of mental health support. This can be achieved by developing digital platforms or using technologies that offer remote support. Mobile apps, like the one used in the JC Men's Space project, can provide self-help tools and initial assessments, making it easier for men to access support discreetly and conveniently.

The stigma surrounding mental illness and gender stereotypes significantly deter men from seeking help. The perception that seeking help or disclosing needs is a sign of weakness is profoundly ingrained and poses a substantial barrier to mental health support. Fung and his colleagues conducted a study to investigate the relationship between knowledge of mental health symptoms and help-seeking attitudes in Hong Kong and it revealed that men viewed help-seeking behavior as a weakness to their masculinity and professional image (Fung et al., 2019). Social services must prioritize stigma reduction initiatives that challenge these harmful stereotypes. Public awareness campaigns, led by influential male figures and supported by media coverage, can play a pivotal role in normalizing mental health struggles and help-

seeking behaviors. Collaborating with community leaders to promote positive attitudes towards mental health and emphasizing that seeking help is a strength rather than a weakness can gradually shift societal perceptions.

### Conclusion

This paper reported initial data analysis from the JC Men's Space project. The JC Men's Space project has profound implications for social services in Hong Kong. By focusing on awareness and education, improving service accessibility, and reducing stigma, social services can significantly enhance the mental health and well-being of men in the community. These efforts will contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment where men feel empowered to seek help and thrive.

### 摘要

#### 香港男性心理健康問題的早期介入計劃：階梯介入模式

賽馬會「再闖男人」計劃是一個為期三年的心理健康項目，旨在為香港的男性提供預防、早期介入和倡導心理健康問題的支持。該項目的主要焦點是每月的活動和心理健康服務。心理健康服務遵循階梯介入模式，根據風險程度和需求將目標人群分配到相應的服務，並分為在線自學、接納與承諾治療小組和認知行為治療個別輔導。在整個三年的項目中，將收集數據以提供更多有關香港男性心理健康問題的見解和理解，以及評估項目有效性的工具。本文報告了初步收集數據的分析結果。

在初步數據收集階段，收集並分析了超過1,800份PHQ-4的回應。還收集了有關男性表現問題、壓力源和求助行為的定性數據。結果顯示，接近60%的受訪者為中年男性，年齡範圍為35至54歲，約三分之一的受訪者被歸類為經歷中度到重度抑鬱和焦慮特徵。關於求助行為，63%的受訪者表示在需要時不會尋求專業幫助。一些男性常見的壓力源包括與工作相關的壓力、家庭和婚姻問題，以及人際關係問題。

根據調查結果，該項目發現中年男性在情緒困擾方面比其他年齡層更脆弱。低求助行為的原因包括資源獲取困難、缺乏知識以及社會對心理疾病的污名和性別角色期望。賽馬會「再闖男人」計劃努力成為一個先驅項目，以促進公眾對心理健康的認識和素養，改善我們目標人群的整體心理健康，並為其

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他心理健康專業人士提供心理教育、流程和指導，作為未來臨床應用中男性的參考框架。

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