Dads and postnatal depression

The risk of postnatal anxiety and depression in mothers is well documented, but Auckland University researchers from the longitudinal Growing Up in New Zealand study have found 2.3 percent of fathers also experience depression during the pregnancy, and this reaches 4.3 percent nine months after their child is born. Other international studies put this figure even higher, suggesting that up to 1 in 10 new dads struggle with depression following the birth of their baby.

In a survey of 3500 Kiwi men, researchers investigated symptoms of depression in the third trimester of their partner’s pregnancy and again nine months after the birth. Fathers most at risk of depression symptoms either felt stressed or were in poor health, although postnatal depression was also influenced by relationship factors. Although paternal depression could not induce harm to their unborn child, it may affect their partner’s mental health and the ongoing development of their children.

From early pregnancy and after baby is born, an involved father can help, support or arrange to meet the needs of both the mother and child. A fully informed father is vital to recovery from birth or through relationship changes and perinatal adjustment.

Men’s lack of awareness of how their relationship changes after baby is born is increasingly recognised as a factor in relationship break downs. Having a child is a major transition in the new parents’ relationship, their family dynamic is altered forever, this can include important cultural or spiritual rituals, but some couples may not understand or anticipate the changes.

Misunderstandings around baby time may be based on:

- New parents ideas of themselves and their roles
- Expectations of each other as a parent and/or partner
- New mothers recovery, support or mental health needs

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Postnatal depression - either direct or indirect

Fathers can be affected by postnatal depression either directly or indirectly. Where they are affected indirectly (through their partner’s depression) common issues are:

• Not knowing how to help a partner through her depression.
• Attempts to help or diagnose are frustrated or met with evasion.
• Disappointment: a father expects a baby to be a joyful event, and result in a happy time. He may feel his partner does not share the idea or is unavailable and distant.
• Partner’s anxieties ‘rub off’ on him and he feels agitated but not sure why.
• Feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities, partly by partner’s altered needs and functionality.

A father may have long days at work and feel he has the baby thrown into his arms as soon as he comes home. Some fathers may go without sleep, or come home to a partner that does not seem to be coping and his ability to function as a parent may be reduced.

At the core of such adjustment problems for men are often:

• Uncertainty about their role (how much or how little does their partner want help).
• Getting mixed messages about his role from friends, family, media.
• His own understanding of fatherhood not matching expectations.
• Bonding with baby is frustrated by an exclusive mother-baby bond.
• He may feel he is not earning enough to make him useful enough.
• Reality differs from his expectations, his initial relationship with the baby is difficult.
• He is unable to help or resolve problems with his partner, and may feel a failure.
• Feeling trapped in relationship he was unsure about, even if he is a keen father.
• Not recognising or foreseeing signs of depression in his partner.

Things to ask fathers who are supporting a partner with PND

Questions you may ask a father who has a partner with postnatal depression:

• What is it like to come home from work at the moment?
• Does she appreciate your efforts to help?
• How do you feel about having a baby?
• Are you worried about baby?
• Do you know how to support her through her PND?
• Do you want to know more about postnatal depression?