

Perinatal Anxiety & Depression in Men

Pregnancy and the first year of parenthood (the perinatal period) is an exciting time that also brings many new challenges and responsibilities. It is now recognised that around 1 in 20 men¹ experience depression during pregnancy (antenatal) and up to 1 in 10 new dads² struggle with depression following the birth of their baby (postnatal). Anxiety is just as common and many men experience anxiety and depression at the same time. It is important to know that help is available and the earlier help is sought the better the outcome for dad and baby.

Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

While it is normal to experience some anxiety about the arrival of a baby, for some men fatherhood brings unexpected and unwelcome thoughts and feelings that can interfere with their enjoyment of being a dad.

If you are worried or concerned about yourself or your partner, it is a good idea to talk to your GP or call PANDA's Helpline. Getting the right help early leads to a faster recovery. It is important not to ignore or 'brush off' symptoms as something you just 'have to live with', as left untreated the problem can get worse. As a general rule, seek help if symptoms last longer than two weeks.

Signs and symptoms of perinatal anxiety and depression can include:

- Constant tiredness or exhaustion
- Ongoing headache and high physical stress levels e.g. muscle tension
- Loss of interest in sex
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep problems (unrelated to baby's sleep)
- Ongoing irritability, anger or moodiness
- Emotional withdrawal from your partner, baby, family, friends

- Fear of caring for baby
- Not wanting to communicate with your partner, family and friends
- Feeling isolated
- Using alcohol or drugs to 'escape' or cope
- Suicide thoughts and behaviours.

What's it Like for Men?

People often think that depression is a form of extreme sadness, characterised by a low mood or constant crying. In fact, anxiety or depression can lead to a very agitated state of mind in some people. Men with depression may feel wound up, frustrated, or unable to relax – a feeling sometimes described as 'like being trapped', or 'pacing in a cage'. They can have outbursts of anger or rage that are 'not in character', leading to feelings of shame or guilt. It is important to recognise these symptoms as signs it may be time to get some help, and not let them simmer away or keep them bottled up.

Who Might be More at Risk?

Men from all walks of life, and all cultures, even those who generally feel confident and assured, can experience anxiety or depression as part of becoming a parent. However, men who feel unsupported or who lack information about what to expect with pregnancy or childbirth may be at increased risk³.

Up to 1 in
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¹ Deloitte Access Economics. The cost of perinatal depression in Australia Report. Post and Antenatal Depression Association 2012.

² Paulson, J. F. & Bazemore, S. D. (2010). Prenatal and postpartum depression in fathers and its association with maternal depression: A meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 303(19), 1961-1969. (doi:10.1001/jama.2010.605)

³ Boyce et. al. First-Time Fathers' Study: psychological distress in expectant fathers during pregnancy. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 2007; 41:718-725

Don't try to 'take on everything' or solve every problem.

Factors that contribute to risk include:

- A previous history of anxiety or depression
- A history of childhood trauma or family conflict
- Sleep deprivation and its impact on family and working life
- Relationship stress/problems: It is common for men's sex lives to change after having a baby, but men may not always anticipate or understand this change⁴. A new mother is often very emotionally involved with or focused on the baby. It is also a physically demanding time for her and this can reduce her desire or energy for sex. Men can experience feelings of resentment or anger towards their partner or the baby as a result of these changes⁵. They can also feel lonely and isolated
- Lack of available/ acceptable supports or networks
- Supporting a partner with perinatal anxiety or depression can trigger a range of difficult emotions, including confusion, fear and helplessness. These feelings can negatively impact men's own well-being.

(For more information, see the PANDA FACTSHEET **Caring for Someone with Perinatal Anxiety & Depression**)

Getting Help

The steps to getting help are:

- **Understand the problem:** recognise the risks, symptoms or signs. As a general rule, symptoms that last for more than two weeks should be checked out with a health professional.
- **Act on these early:** the longer the problem is left, the worse it can get. It is courageous and honest to admit that you need help.

Who You Can Talk To

- Your GP can assess your physical and mental health and refer you to a specialist or an appropriate service if needed. There are medical treatments for anxiety and depression such as medication and counselling and peer support (talking to other fathers). **If you do not get the support you need, seek a second opinion**

- The PANDA Helpline can provide support, information and referrals
- The **How is Dad Going?** website provides information specifically for men adjusting to fatherhood
- Mensline is a men's mental health service with 24 hour 7 day telephone support: 1300 78 99 78.

Tips for Looking After Yourself

- Recognise that having a baby brings many unexpected changes for you and your partner: give yourself time to adjust.
- Life might be different, but being a dad is also a wonderful experience. Take some time getting to know your baby.
- Don't try to 'take on everything' or solve every problem: you are part of a team.
- Keep in touch with your mates and helpful family members: good mates are especially important at this time.
- Keep well and fit, and look after your health with good food and exercise.
- You don't need to deal with this alone. If you think you need some help or support, don't be afraid or ashamed to ask. Your health and wellbeing is important to your baby.

⁴ Condon, J.T. et. al. The First-Time Fathers Study: a prospective study of the mental health and wellbeing of men during the transition to parenthood. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 2004; 38:56-64.

⁵ See e.g. Condon, J., 2006. What about dad? Psychosocial and mental health issues for new fathers. *Australian Family Physician* 35, 690-692.

