

Characteristics of fathers with depressive symptoms

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Voluminous research literature attests to the multiple negative consequences of maternal depression and depressive symptoms for the health and development of children. In contrast, there is a profound paucity of information about depressive symptoms in fathers according to a follow up study by NYU School of Medicine researchers in the February 23rd online edition of *Maternal and Child Health Journal*.

In late 2011 lead investigator, Michael Weitzman, MD, professor of [Pediatrics](#) and [Environmental Medicine](#) and his co-authors identified, for the first time ever, in a large and nationally representative sample, increased rates of mental health problems of children whose [fathers](#) had depressive symptoms. In that paper, 6% of children with neither a mother or a father with depressive symptoms, 15% of those with a father, 20% of those with a mother, and 25% of children with both a mother and a father with depressive symptoms had evidence of emotional or behavioral problems.

"While the finding of increased rates of mental health problems among children whose fathers had depressive symptoms was not surprising in our earlier study, the fact that no prior large scale studies had investigated this issue is truly remarkable, as is the finding that one out of every four children with both a mother and a father with [symptoms of depression](#) have mental health problems" said Weitzman. He also noted that the findings highlighted "the urgent need to recognize the roles of fathers in the lives of children and families in clinical and public policy formulation and implementation, to further explore ways in which the

mental health of fathers influence the health and function of our nation's children, and to structure our health and human services so as to identify and effectively treat fathers who are depressed or suffering from other [mental health problems](#). A first step is to identify which of our nation's fathers are at increased risk for depression, which is the main reason that we undertook the current study"

The current paper, again using a large and nationally [representative sample](#) of households in the USA (7,247 households in which mothers, fathers and children lived), is the first paper to investigate characteristics of fathers that are independently associated with increased rates of depressive symptoms. Overall, 6% of all fathers had scores suggesting that they were suffering from depressive symptoms.

Using previously widely used measures of fathers', mothers' and children's physical and [mental health](#), as well as numerous other family and child characteristics, such as maternal and paternal age, race, marital status, and educational attainment, as well as child age, these data demonstrate the following factors being independently associated with increased rates of fathers' depressive symptoms: living in poverty (1.5 times as common as not living in poverty); living with a child with special health care needs (1.4 times as common); living with a mother with depressive symptoms (5.75 times as common); poor paternal physical health (3.31 times as common) and paternal unemployment (6.50 times as common).

While the findings of poverty, having a child with special health care needs, and living with a mother with depressive symptoms are not unexpected, the fact that fathers' unemployment is by far the strongest predictor of depressive symptoms is a brand new, and unique finding with profound implications for the health and development of children in this time of extremely high rates of unemployment.

"The findings reported in the current paper demonstrate factors that could help identify fathers who might benefit from clinical screening for depression, and we believe the results are particularly salient given the current financial crisis and concurrent increase in unemployment in the USA" said Dr. Weitzman. "Also of serious concern is the fact that living with a mother who herself has depressive symptoms is almost associated with almost as large an increased rate of paternal [depressive symptoms](#) as is paternal unemployment. Fathers play profoundly important roles in the lives of children and families, and are all too often forgotten in our efforts to help children. These new findings, we hope, will be useful to much needed efforts to develop strategies to identify and treat the very large number of fathers with depression."

Provided by New York University School of Medicine

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