

Study finds more evidence why depressed dads should seek help

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

New research from BYU social work professor Kevin Shafer shows that a dad's depression can have a specific impact on his parenting.

"Many studies look at moms who are depressed and how they impact children," Shafer said. "Very few looked at how depressed fathers influence their children. As dads become more involved in their

children's lives, we thought this was an important question with significant implications for families."

The research, published last month, found that a father's [depression](#) had a direct effect on both internalized and externalized behavioral problems in adolescents. Internalizing behaviors include high levels of withdrawal, anxiety and depressed mood. Externalizing behaviors are directed outward and are associated with heightened anger and aggression. In contrast, the study also showed that maternal depression impacts kids, but in more subtle ways, since most women internalize their depression.

"Kids probably pick up on their dad's depression in ways they don't with mothers," Shafer said. "Men are more likely to show anger and frustration. Children are going to notice, and it's going to affect them."

Mental health awareness campaigns have been popping up across the country, especially on college campuses. Shafer says these are helpful in showing people, particular men, that it's alright to talk about [mental health](#) openly and honestly.

At BYU, star quarterback Tanner Mangum opened up about his own mental health battles during BYU's recent #MentalHealthMatters campaign. His Instagram post was a revelation to many. It spread throughout social media and made local and national headlines.

As more prominent male figures continue to share their experiences like this, Shafer says it can have a positive ripple effect with other men being more willing to share and seek help themselves. This would then benefit more than just themselves in the long run.

"What Tanner showed is that it's OK for men to be vulnerable and admit to [mental health issues](#)," Shafer said. "Tanner is what many would call a man's man. He plays football. He might be the most visible male student

on this campus. We need men to understand that if they are depressed, its OK to get help. It will benefit them, their families and their communities."

Depression is the most common mental health issue in the United States, with approximately seven percent experiencing a [major depressive episode](#) each year and nearly 20 percent experiencing it in their lifetime.

BYU graduate students Brandon Fielding and Doug Wendt were co-authors on the study with Shafer. Fielding recently graduated with his master's of social work from BYU. Wendt is currently a second-year PhD student in marriage and family therapy at BYU.

"In studying and researching men's depression with Kevin, it has not only expanded my definitions of mental health for men, but I have become more forthcoming with friends and loved ones about my own challenges and shortcomings regarding mental [health](#)," Field said.

More information: Kevin Shafer et al. Similarities and Differences in the Influence of Paternal and Maternal Depression on Adolescent Well-Being, *Social Work Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/swr/svx006](https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svx006)

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