

Becoming a new parent is challenging, and fathers need support too

December 8 2021, by Rachel Leonard, Mark Linden



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Becoming a new father can be a difficult and [overwhelming time](#). And more and more, we're hearing about the mental health impact this can have on men, with some research suggesting as many as [one in ten men](#)

suffer from [postnatal depression](#).

While there's often information and mental [health](#) support available for mothers during the [postnatal period](#), many fathers aren't given the same amount of information and support for their [own mental health](#) during this time. This was something our previous research revealed, showing men aren't getting the [support they needed](#)—both for their own mental health, and in knowing how best to support their partner through her mental health struggles.

There's a significant need to recognize and support men who are struggling. Not only will this improve their health and wellbeing, but [recent research](#) has also revealed that treating parental depression (in both mothers and fathers) may have long-term benefits for the child's mental health, too.

Supporting new fathers

As part of a [larger study](#) looking at postnatal mental health, we interviewed seven fathers and asked them about their experiences of being a new parent, interacting with health visitors and their experience of supporting their partner through her mental health struggles.

All of the fathers we spoke to felt pressure to support their partner and be the "protector" of the family, they also felt they lacked the skills and knowledge to do this—especially if their partner was struggling with her mental health. Overall, all also agreed having more information about the postnatal period and postnatal mental illness would better help them support their partner—and lessen the impact on both mother and baby.

Despite this, every father we interviewed felt formal services (such as health visiting or [mental health services](#)) did not share this view—often leaving them out of the decision-making process about treatment and

support options. This led to feeling resentment and frustration towards the system—especially not knowing how they could support their partner between counseling appointments.

All seven fathers felt that they couldn't talk to a health visitor, even if they needed to for help in supporting their partner, or help with their own mental health or dealing with their new role as a parent. [Other studies](#) have also shown this, finding men feel excluded by these services or feel that they aren't entitled to use these services.

There are many reasons why men may feel this way—including fathers feeling they [have to be strong](#) or can't be emotional, or because their work may prevent them from being there [during health visits](#).

Mental health

While not all fathers we interviewed wanted support for their own mental health, those who did felt that they had no where to go to for support.

Four of the fathers felt that if they were to accept support, they would prefer informal mental health support (such as talking with friends or other fathers). But all agreed there was a stigma against seeking help for their mental health, seeing it as less masculine if they did.

This is concerning, as we know that around 36% of men who struggle with poor mental health don't get the [help they need](#). This may be due to health professionals often not seeing fathers as a [priority](#), and fathers feeling reluctant to express that they [need support](#) during this time.

Another reason this [lack of support](#) is concerning is because there's an [increased risk](#) of poor mental health for both mothers and fathers in the period just after the baby is born. This often happens because of the

significant life changes, and the need to adjust to an array of new roles and tasks. Studies also show that around 5-10% of fathers experience [perinatal depression](#), with a further 5–15% experiencing perinatal anxiety.

But while the mental health of UK mothers is [routinely screened](#) in the perinatal period by health visitors, the same isn't true for fathers. This is why there's a push to recognize the need to routinely assess men's mental health in the [perinatal period](#) as well. Doing so would potentially see more men diagnosed and treated with mental health conditions that might otherwise have gone undetected—benefiting [not only fathers](#), but mothers and children too.

Although our study only interviewed a small number of fathers, other research with dads has [found similar results](#). Alongside ensuring men have someone to talk to or somewhere they can go to for support during this time, research also suggests that [increasing mental health literacy](#) can help more men seek help if they need it.

While there's been increasing recognition of the need to support fathers in the postnatal period, and some services specific to fathers (such as Dads Matter UK, SureStart, Fatherhood Institute, Fathers Reaching out, #HowAreYouDad?), there's [limited research](#) on what supports are both acceptable and effective for fathers. This is why research needs to investigate how health visiting and other services can engage with and [support fathers](#) in a way that benefits and works for them.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Becoming a new parent is challenging, and fathers need support too (2021, December 8) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-parent-fathers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.