



Healthy Dads?

The challenge of being a new father

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O P E N M I N D

Background

Recognising that new fathers face an increased risk for mental health problems, *beyondblue*, proudly funded by The Movember Foundation, commissioned this research to understand experiences of psychological distress in new fathers, the barriers and facilitators of help seeking, appropriate communication concepts for engagement, and identify strategies to support them and help build their resilience.

Hall & Partners | Open Mind undertook a multi-stage, multi-method research project, comprising a knowledge audit of existing literature and stakeholder views, 16 qualitative discussion groups, 5 in-depth interviews, an online forum and a quantitative online survey of over 1,500 new fathers.

Key Outcomes of the Research

Men experience significant internalised pressure in their role as fathers

While fatherhood is a time of great joy and happiness, men can feel overwhelmed by the need to be the financial and emotional support of their family and the sacrifices they have to make in their new role. The dichotomy of fatherhood is illustrated by 89% of new dads agreeing they ‘find real joy in their role as a father’ and 41% feeling ‘overwhelmed by the sacrifices they have to make for their family’.

This internalised pressure that new fathers face encompasses feelings of pride and self-sufficiency, a reluctance to share pain with their partner, shame with feeling they are unable to cope with challenges such as a lack of sleep, juggling work and family commitments and the stress of fatherhood, and a sense that they need to be strong, and ‘man up’ and bear the weight of their responsibilities without the support of others. Illustrating this pressure, 79% agree they ‘need to be the rock for their family’ and 77% feel that ‘even when I’m stressed or down about being a dad I suck it up and get on with it’.

“Blokes are obligated to be the strong one, be the man. Not only take care of the baby but your partner as well. You have to be ‘the rock’ and take care of everything it feels like that is the dad role– it’s hard.”

New fathers are at the greatest risk of psychological distress

New fathers experience a wide range of challenges as they transition into their new role and deal with the disruption of life with young baby and the juggling of their work and personal commitments. The result is often high levels of stress – 57% of first time fathers experience at least moderate stress in their child’s first year of life, as do 46% of expectant fathers.

The outcome of this widespread stress, and often low resilience, is psychological distress and 39% of first-time fathers with a child aged under one and 33% of expectant fathers score high for their risk of depression/anxiety. Finding and connecting with first-time fathers, who are likely to see their own experiences and feelings as less important than their partners, and supporting them in their new role is of critical importance.

“Being a first time parent is physically and mentally challenging. Interrupted sleep schedules, conflicts with my partner over parenting issues, financial stress, worrying over the baby’s health, less spare time to hang out with my mates etc”.

New fathers have a superficial and incomplete understanding of PND and who it can affect

While fathers are exposed to such high risk of psychological distress they exhibit a limited understanding of paternal ante/postnatal depression, indeed, almost half (45%) of new dads were not aware that PND can affect men as well as women and 31% consider PND among men as a sign of weakness. The negative view that new fathers hold towards ante/ postnatal depression and anxiety is damaging to themselves and their peers, it is seen as something to hide, feel defensive about and even ashamed of.

“Guys are pretty much better at hiding it, you know a girl will probably bawl their eyes out to a mate but a guy wouldn’t. A guy tends to swallow their pride a bit and just go to work and carry on as usual.”

Men do not want to identify ‘dad stress’ with depression and anxiety

The negative attitudes towards depression and anxiety generally, and specifically towards PND among fathers, present a significant barrier to men seeking help and support in their role as fathers. As men are more open to acknowledging the challenges and stress of fatherhood positioning PND among fathers as ‘dad stress’ is likely to work more effectively. Developing widespread acknowledgement of the challenges of fatherhood is important and will work to reduce barriers to help seeking.

“I’m honestly surprised that I made it, you know, if we are being honest here, because I didn’t turn to anybody. It was like you can’t show your emotions, you’ve gotta be there for her and for the child and you’ve still got to keep a roof over your head and get the bills paid and work like nothing’s happened.”

The partner relationship is of critical importance and facilitates access to support and information

Having a child deepens the relationship between parents, but it also changes it fundamentally – 72% new dads with their first child aged under one year agree that their relationship with their partner ‘is stronger since we had a baby’ and yet 50% of new dads agree that they ‘fight a lot more’ now and 47% of first-time fathers feel less important to their partner.

“Sliding down in the order is one of the toughest things I have found – first one comes along and so you become second in line. You are used to being your partner’s priority and she yours. I’ve had to keep her as my priority but the kids are there for hers. If you are lucky you slide in just before the dog.”

Those relationships that are aware of the challenges that lie ahead, and who have planned and negotiated their roles and responsibilities prior to the birth, fare better than those who are less prepared. A strong partner relationship can also create a positive pathway for new fathers to access support and advice. These research findings highlight the importance for couples to be given the tools to meet the challenges of parenthood together, to support each other and their relationship, and to short circuit partnership stresses.

Fathers tend to seek information reactively and rely on their partner to be a conduit for advice and direction

New fathers are open to seeking help and information, but tend to 'learn as they go' and seek information specific to the challenge they are currently facing. New and expectant fathers indicate only a moderate level of satisfaction with the availability of information that helps prepare for fatherhood - while 56% agree that there is 'enough information for me to prepare', less than half (45%) consider there to be 'a lot of information directed at me as the father',

There are key points in the pregnancy and soon after the birth that new fathers are especially primed to receive practical information and advice relating to their role, experiences and feelings, how to care for a baby and how to support their partner. Online or digital information is highly valued as it can be accessed discretely and is available 24/7.

"With a busy life, it needs to be quickly and easily accessed. Anything mobile based is great as it can be done privately. For example, I know early on I would be up all hours and often simply pick up my mobile phone and search the web for info or tips on sleeping, coping etc."

Fathers show a general lack of satisfaction with their engagement with professionals and the availability of father-specific support and advice

There is a sense that men feel somewhat remote from the pregnancy and restricted in their new role as a father as the majority of information and support is directed towards the mother. First time fathers generally wish they knew more about parenting they had timely access to father-specific information and more visibility in the eyes of the healthcare system.

Moving from a mother-centric focus to a model of co-parenting is important if fathers are to feel valued and be actively involved with raising their children.