

## FAST FACTS

# Fathers' Mental Health

**Becoming a parent is an exciting and significant life transition. Yet the demands of caring for a newborn baby can take a toll on parents' mental health.**

It is well known that postpartum depression can affect mothers, but fathers may also experience it. In fact, studies show that 1 in 10 men struggle with postpartum depression.

### **Q: How can becoming a father affect mental health?**

After the birth of a baby, it's common to feel overwhelmed and exhausted. Fathers may experience changes in their relationship, as their spouse may understandably be focused on caring for the baby. Sleep deprivation can contribute to symptoms of anxiety and depression as well.

Hormonal changes play a role too. Studies have shown that fathers experience hormonal changes, particularly drops in testosterone, while their partner is pregnant and after childbirth. They may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder and be at an increased risk for postpartum depression if their baby was born preterm or if the birth was traumatic.

### **Q: How can a father's mental health affect children and families?**

Mental health challenges like anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder can interfere with a father's ability to care for his new baby and other family members who also need support.

Studies have shown that a father's depression can affect their ability to bond with their child through reading, teaching and playing. This can make it more likely that children will experience emotional, cognitive and behavioral problems.

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## Q: What are the risk factors for paternal depression?

Risk factors for paternal depression include:

- Postpartum depression in their spouse
- History of mental illness
- Relationship problems
- Financial concerns
- Lack of social support

A preterm or traumatic birth experience and uncertainty of their partner or baby's wellness can contribute to a father's risk of mental health complications. In fact, up to 7% of fathers may experience post-traumatic stress disorder after the birth of their child.

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## Q: What are the signs and symptoms a father may be struggling?

Paternal depression can look different for every person. Common symptoms include:



DEPRESSED  
MOOD



SEVERE MOOD SWINGS  
& IRRITABILITY



ANGER



WITHDRAWING FROM  
FAMILY AND FRIENDS



DIFFICULTY BONDING  
WITH BABY



HOPELESSNESS



TROUBLE SLEEPING

## Q: What are the treatment options for paternal depression?

While paternal depression is understudied, there are treatments and resources that can bring relief to new fathers.

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy.** Talking with a therapist has been shown to alleviate symptoms of depression.
- **Increased support.** New fathers may find relief when their feelings are acknowledged and validated through support groups or talking with other fathers. Employers can also play a role by offering paid paternity leave to help fathers adjust during the postpartum period.
- **Medication.** Physician-prescribed medications may relieve symptoms of depression.

## Q: What can be done to reduce the stigma associated with fathers' mental health?

Masculine stereotypes, cultural background and fear of judgment can make it less likely for men to report that they are experiencing feelings of depression or anxiety.

Raising awareness about how a father's mental health can be impacted by the birth of a new baby can help men feel more comfortable and validated in their experience. This can include educating men about the possibility of postpartum depression and increasing support systems for new fathers.

## Q: What can policymakers and health care providers do to support fathers' mental health?

Policymakers can work to raise awareness and support policy that reduces barriers to screening and treatment for fathers. This could include increased access to different forms of treatments, support, paternity leave, or requiring paternal mental health screenings at well-child visits, like they do for mothers.

Health care providers can help fathers recognize the symptoms and talk to them about treatment options. By making fathers aware of paternal depression, health care providers can be well on their way to improving outcomes for new fathers.



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