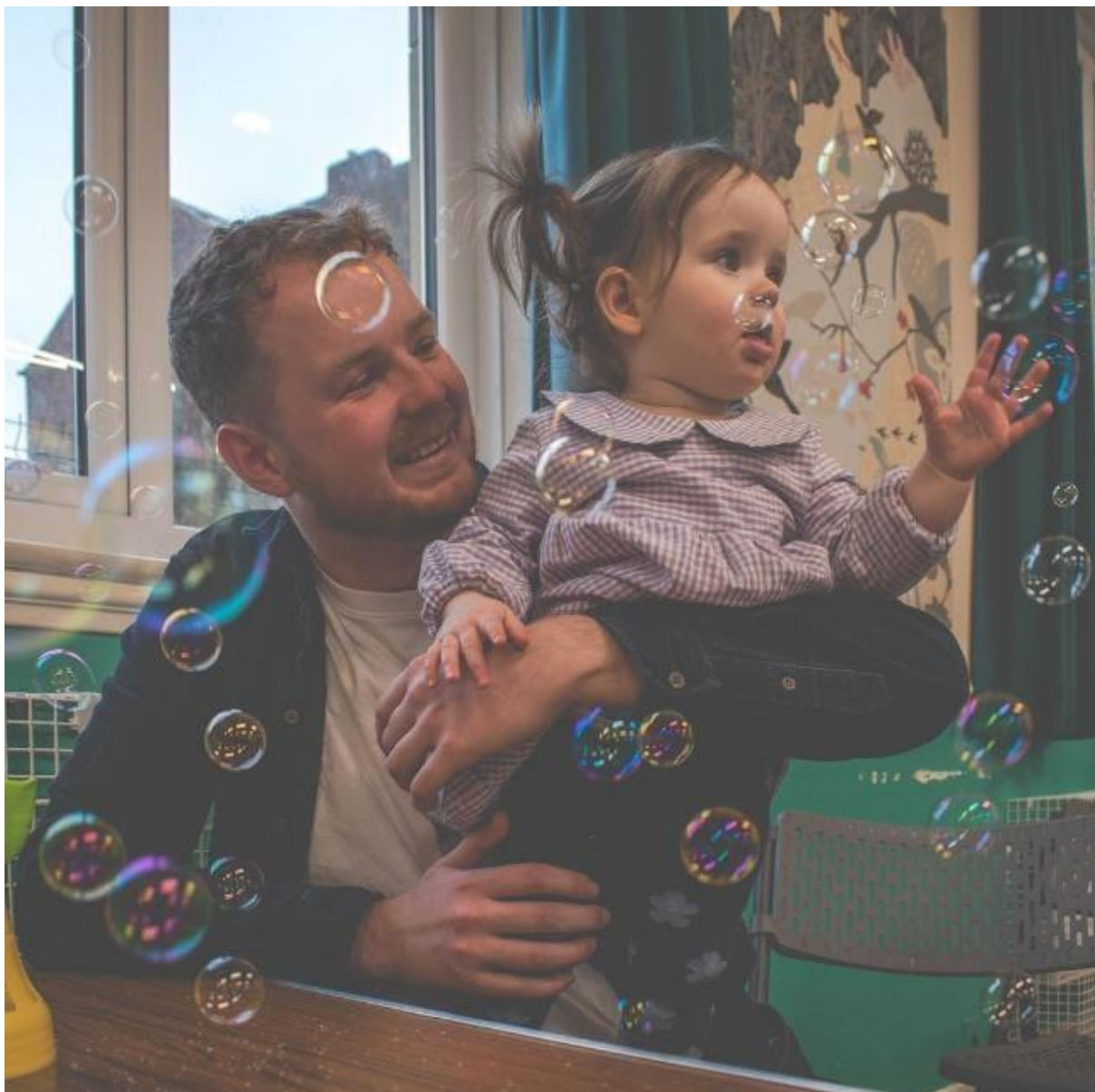


‘So much of my mental health struggles originated from the feeling of inadequacy as a dad’

Niall took three weeks of fully paid leave when his daughter was born, but struggled with his mental health and connecting with his daughter



Niall Bacon is a 28-year-old dad of a daughter now 19 months old. He had two weeks of paternity leave and took one week of annual leave when his daughter was born. After a traumatic labour and birth, Niall was only home with his daughter and partner for two weeks. He wished he had more time with his daughter, even just a couple more weeks, to grow in confidence as a parent.

When our daughter was born in February 2023, I had planned to take two weeks of paternity leave, which was fully paid, and one week of annual leave. At the time, I didn't even think to ask for more. I just took what was offered to me by the charity I was working for.

When my partner was induced, I started my paternity leave. But she didn't give birth to our daughter, through emergency c-section, until a week later. It meant that one of my three weeks off work was spent back and forth visiting my partner in the hospital.

Once we were home, I spent a lot of time caring for my partner. She struggled to move around a lot after the c-section.

That first morning I walked out the front door to return to work, I remember feeling so guilty, even though I didn't have a choice. I was leaving her alone with our new baby.

As I worked all day, and my partner cared for the baby, I felt really disconnected from my own daughter. I didn't recognise any of her cues – didn't know when she needed changing, feeding, or sleeping.

It made me feel completely inadequate as a parent, then add on top of that stress, isolation, and pressure. The only thing I knew to do was to work to make us more money.

If I couldn't adequately take care of my daughter, then it was my role to make our family money. I became obsessed with it though. I would work my 9-5 job and then come home to the computer to find any other means of making money.

But my mental health took a downward turn, something I had never experienced before. The pressure from my day job was hugely increasing, I felt like an incapable dad, and my endless hours working at night were taking a toll. When my little girl was eight months old, I got signed off

from work. I couldn't do anything in the house to help my partner or baby. I already felt like a rubbish dad – this only made it worse.

While I was off, I started looking around for another job. I found a job helping dads with their mental health in the perinatal period. I knew if something like that had existed for me six months prior, I wouldn't have spiralled like I did. I applied and got the job. I now work four days a week, taking off Fridays to spend time with my daughter going on adventures together. It has been priceless.

In addition to Talking Therapy, the job change did me the world of good. I finally feel like I'm able to engage with my daughter.

It would have made a world of difference if I had more time off with my daughter and partner during those first weeks. So much of my mental health struggles originated from the feeling of inadequacy as a dad. I didn't feel like an equal parent. That I couldn't be her dad. If I could have been there to change nappies, do feedings, put her to sleep, calm her cries, and make her smile, I'm sure I would have felt more confident to be her dad.

That time is so pivotal and precious to get to know them – even two extra weeks would have made me feel empowered as a parent.