

Looking after your health

Becoming a dad can be a time of great happiness but it's not unusual to experience stress, anxiety, low mood, depression, or other difficulties.

Mental health

Becoming a father involves sharp and sometimes unexpected changes to your life and identity, at the same time as dealing with various practical and emotional challenges – this can lead to significant mental health difficulties.

Anxiety and depression are the two most widely recognised mental health problems experienced by fathers in the perinatal period, with the peak time for depression being between three and six months after the birth¹.

But your stress level may also increase. The postnatal period is a challenging time, as you try to balance the various demands placed on you including personal and work related needs, your new role as a parent, your family's emotional needs of the family, and societal and economic pressures.²

The most common factors contributing to stress in fathers in the perinatal period include³:

- Negative feelings about the pregnancy
- Role restrictions related to becoming a father
- Fear of childbirth
- Feelings of incompetence about infant care

Risk factors for depression amongst fathers include⁴:

- Financial stress
- Poor social support
- Dissatisfaction in the couple relationship

¹ Paulson JF, Bazemore SD. Prenatal and postpartum depression in fathers and its association with maternal depression: a meta-analysis. *JAMA* 2010; 303 19:1961–1969.

² Genesoni L, Tallandini MA. Men's psychological transition to fatherhood: an analysis of the literature, 1989–2008. *Birth* 2009; 36 4:305–317.

³ Philpott LF, Leahy-Warren P, FitzGerald S, Savage E. Stress in fathers in the perinatal period: A systematic review. *Midwifery* 2017; 55:113–127.

⁴ Dr Deborah Da Costa (Guest) (2024, March 24) Perinatal Mental Health for Dads [Audio podcast episode] in *The Fathering Project Podcast* [Link](#)

- History of mental health difficulties
- Having a partner who is experiencing mental health difficulties
- Sleep deprivation.

How you might feel – and how to deal with this

Paternal perinatal mental health difficulties can express themselves in a variety of ways – you may feel⁵:

- Lonely, withdrawn, or sad
- Irritable or angry
- Worried or guilty
- Fatigued or have difficulty sleeping
- Distracted or indecisive
- Confused about your new role as a father, anxious about your ability to father, or disengaged from caregiving.

Fathers sometimes interpret their struggles as inappropriate or unacceptable when compared with the wellbeing of their partner or baby⁶. Your positioning as a peripheral supporter⁷ can lead to a broader, internalised sense that your own experience, perspective, and feelings ought not to be important at this time.

Such a feeling is only made worse by powerful gendered expectations on you to be strong for your partner⁸. Feeling in need of support for yourself may trigger strong feelings of failure and self-blame.

All of this can lead men to hold back from seeking help, leaving their mental health problems to go undetected⁹. It's important not to fall into this trap.

Looking after yourself as far as possible is a great starting point: eat healthily, get a good amount of sleep, get outside and move your body,

⁵ Beszlag, D. and Hodkinson, P. 'Paternal perinatal mental health difficulties: an evidence review commissioned by the National Childbirth Trust' [Link](#)

⁶ Daniels, E., Arden-Close, E. and Mayers, A. (2020) 'Be quiet and man up: a qualitative questionnaire study into fathers who witnessed their partner's birth trauma' *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 20, 1-12

⁷ Hodkinson, P. and Das, R. (2021) *New fathers, mental health, and digital communications* Palgrave

⁸ Rochlen, A.B. et al. (2010) 'Barriers in diagnosing and treating men with depression: a focus group report' *American Journal of Men's Health* 4(2)

⁹ Lemmons, B.P., Dennis, G.Y. and Rollin, L.S. (2023b). Framing Father Engagement in Bellamy, J.L., Lemmons, B.P., Cryer-Coupet, Q.R., and Shadik, J.A. (Eds) *Social Work Practice with Fathers: Engagement, Assessment, and Intervention*, Springer

keep up with your interests, and keep in touch with friends and/or family. Make time to reflect on your mood, and try to pay attention to things that drag you down – this type of self-reflection can help you to work out ways to keep yourself feeling good.

If you haven't already, now is a great time to learn some breathing exercises to keep calm and manage any frustrations. So, take a long, deep breath and then slowly exhale to let go of stress and tension. A great technique is to make sure your stomach expands when you breathe in, and contracts when you exhale. This is the opposite of what we normally do and breathing this way can really help to calm your brain, body, and mind.

You could even go one step further, and try meditation, mindfulness, or yoga exercises.

It is crucial that you recognise that your own mental health is important – for your partner and your baby, as well as for yourself – and reach out for support if you're struggling. Please don't suffer in silence.

You may find our [Becoming Dad guide](#), which we developed in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation, useful.

Check out our [Resources for fathers](#), for a list of information sources, organisations and support groups – including some with a mental health focus. You can also access a [factographic](#) containing info, short films, and signposting to further resources for new dads experiencing mental health difficulties.

Physical health

It's vital that you continue to look after yourself and stay healthy.

Exercise

Try to get into the habit of taking regular exercise if you're not already doing so. It will help you cope better with the tiredness and stress new babies can bring. There are lots of ways to build exercise into your daily life. Even when you are busy and may not have the time or money to go to gyms or leisure centres, you can do low cost, easy exercises from stair climbing to walking and skipping.

NHS Better Health advice on [getting active](#) and [losing weight](#).

Drugs and alcohol

Fatherhood can be a perfect prompt to rethink your relationship with drugs and alcohol – to protect your children from direct harm, as well as to lead by example.

Drugs and alcohol change how your brain and body function. They change the balance of chemicals that help your brain to think, feel, make decisions – and look after other people.

If you're going through a tough time, it can be tempting to use drugs and alcohol as a coping strategy. But they don't solve anything, and these are addictive substances that can cause all sorts of damage to your physical and mental health, and to your relationships.

Changing drug and alcohol habits can be tough, but you'll be a better Dad for it – and if you make the change, your partner will be more likely to do so to.

Drugs

Find out how the NHS can help you tackle [drug addiction](#).

You can reach out to [Frank](#) for information or [Narcotics Anonymous](#) for direct support.

If you're a family member or carer concerned about someone's drug use, reach out to [Adfam](#).

Alcohol

Read NHS Better Health advice on [drinking less](#), and find out how the NHS can help you tackle [alcohol addiction](#).

You can reach out to [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) for direct support.

If you're a family member or carer concerned about someone's drinking, reach out to [Adfam](#).

Smoking

If you're a smoker, the single best thing you can do to help your child is to quit. Smokers' children are more likely to become smokers themselves, and that's not a legacy you want to pass on.

If your partner smokes while pregnant, encourage her to give up by giving up yourself. If you don't smoke, get her some support to help her stop.

NHS Better Health advice on [stopping smoking](#).

Find out about NHS support to stop smoking [here](#).