

Sad Dad

Leadership and Parent Transition Coach, Ben Jackson, offers his advice on paternal postpartum depression (PPD), including signs to look out for and where to turn to for help.

Did you hear about the one where a man gets postnatal depression? As a female friend quipped when I mentioned the subject of the article, ‘Do men have to take one more thing from us?’ Unfortunately, it is no joke, nor a laughing matter or a desire for men to take over what has, until recently, been a condition that seems to be suffered solely by mothers.

A quick search will provide the reader with no end of evidence of paternal postpartum depression (PPD). A 2014 study published in *Pediatrics* found that depression among new dads increased by 68 percent during the first five years of baby's life. Yet there's little in the way of a conclusive set of symptoms or diagnostic tools to clearly identify whether someone is suffering from PPD. So why do some men suffer from PPD and others not? It's time to talk about the effects on men of life after birth.

Suffering in Silence

Like many mental health conditions, paternal postpartum depression isn't overt. It isn't as tangible as a broken bone or a rash on an arm. Whilst it's true to say ‘the backbone is connected to the neck bone’, depression or any other mental condition is far more elusive, often – though not exclusively – representing the thoughts in your head with feelings, pains and problems in seemingly unrelated organs. Our bodies reveal the hidden depression through subtler means.

As mentioned above, currently the diagnostic criteria used to understand paternal PPD are the same used for maternal PPD. There are no established criteria for PPD in men, although it could present over the course of a year. This in itself indicates that more accurate and valid tools need to be used to better understand paternal PPD.

PPD Indicators

Paternal postpartum depression in dads can show itself in different ways. With that said, look out for these indicators and talk with a doctor or medical professional if you're concerned:

- Fear, confusion, helplessness and uncertainty about the future as well as feelings of worthlessness
- Poor sleep, hygiene, or insomnia
- A drop in self-care, hobbies and personal interests; a loss in interest in the things that once brought joy

- You might become more impulsive than usual
- Mood swings and/or irritability that seem disproportionate to the issue
- Might be a struggle to stay focused or levels of concentration seem to run out quicker
- Changes in appetite and weight. Eating habits might change, either eating too little or comfort eating
- Physical symptoms, headaches, indigestion, muscular pain may all indicate a battle which is more than just a rough day at the office or a broken night's sleep.
- You may turn to alcohol, or other substances, far more than usual, using them to make yourself feel better
- You may start to think of suicide or death

PPD is as easy to spot as depression is in anyone else, **by which I mean it's often not easy at all**. So I encourage you to be looking for these subtle indicators, either in yourself or a friend.

Feeling a bit down or low can often be remedied by a better night's sleep, taking some time to be with friends or exercise. However, depression rarely lets you off so easily; these recharging activities often do not lessen the feelings and those feelings can last longer and increase in severity.

Yet why do some men experience it and others not? There is some value in realising that the period of time after the birth is not in itself the cause of PPD, but perhaps due to personal history that has created a susceptibility to depression. It may well not be the birth in of itself, nor the baby but within the experience that activates this susceptibility.

Here are some suggestions if you think either you or a friend has PPD:

Action:

Talk with your partner and or a friend

PPD is not something that can be easily washed away and is best not ignored. Talking through what you're experiencing and being listened to may provide the right amount of support. If it's not enough or you don't feel you can turn to a friend, then...

Seek therapeutic help

As I said, depression is not to be messed with. I won't pull any punches; you or your friend are best to seek therapeutic support.

Don't ignore the thoughts or feelings

It is all too easy to muscle down and think it's best to just get through the feelings. However in doing so it only furthers the feelings as you fight against them.

In addition, make sure you're practising the best self-care you can.

- Eat well; make healthy food choices
- Exercise; even a daily walk around the block changes your breathing, blood flow and muscles
- Mindfulness practises such as meditation, yoga or an engaging crossword
- Rest (grabbing a catnap can take off the edge), but on the back of that, look to keep a regular (as much as possible) sleep routine.

Finally...

Try to understand it is more than just a surface issue. It's highly likely that PPD is the resulting behaviour of a different experience you'd had. Brushing these feelings aside in no way makes them disappear. They may leave your conscious awareness, yet they will not leave your somatic/physical awareness and, as illustrated above, might make their presence known in other ways. Ultimately PPD is a signal, a call to attend to what you're experiencing. I invite you to not ignore the call.

References:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6659987/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2922346/>

https://dadmatters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MARK_WILLIAMS_FATHERS_REACHING_OUT_PMH_R EPORT10_SEP_2020-2.pdf

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2014/04/09/peds.2013-3262>

**Please note that this article is general signposting and is not a specific endorsement or recommendation by Bright Horizons. Should you utilise or download any resources, any exchange of data is solely between you and that provider – please note that the resources may be subject to their own terms and conditions and / or privacy notice. (As Bright Horizons has no control of the contents of the external resources, it can assume no responsibility or liability for these resources or the provider's use of any data you share with them.)*