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LIFESTYLE

Why men get baby blues

POSTNATAL DEPRESSION IS NOT JUST A FEMALE ISSUE. FOR EVERY TWO MUMS SUFFERING FROM IT, THERE IS ONE DAD. BY Lollie Barr

A much-anticipated new baby arrives into the world, full of fresh promise and wonder, carrying its parents' hopes, dreams and expectations on its tiny little shoulders.

While it's meant to be the most joyous of all life experiences, for some parents, their newborn baby brings with it an incapacitating psychological illness: postnatal depression (PND). It affects more than 15 per cent of new mothers and 10 per cent of new fathers.

But the real figures may be much higher, says Belinda Horton, CEO of the Post and Antenatal Depression Association (Panda). She says many parents are afraid to admit that they're not coping and are experiencing painful emotions and feelings after the birth of a child, and are ashamed to ask for help. This is particularly prevalent in men – not surprising when you consider the fact that men in the 20- to 35-year age group rarely seek medical, let alone emotional help.

"Sadly, parents feel that there is a stigma to even admitting that they are experiencing difficulties," Horton says. "They often feel they will be judged as bad parents and the authorities will get involved.

"It is not the case, and there is absolutely no correlation between depression and anxiety and

bad parenting. Many men hope that the negative feelings and emotions they are experiencing will simply pass. However, worry and anxiety can develop into depression and desperation."

NEW CHALLENGE

As any new parent will attest, while it is rewarding, caring for a new baby is probably one of the biggest challenges they've ever had to face.

Rebecca Dunn, a perinatal psychologist and committee member of the Gidget Foundation, which promotes awareness of perinatal anxiety and depression, says: "Parents make a mammoth transition and there are a lot of expectations of how it should be due to societal expectations and the media's portrayal.

"But often, when their whole world has been turned upside down, the reality doesn't add up. Men are often under-prepared: suddenly they have to juggle work stress, financial pressures, being a support to the mother, the loss of the freedoms they took for granted before their child was born, lack of sleep, lack of sex and coming to terms with the change of identity that comes with being a father."

Trying to be a super dad can push a man to the very edge, especially if they have an unsettled



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baby, which is another predictor for postnatal depression.

Other precursors for male PND are a genetic predisposition to developing depression, witnessing a traumatic birth, relationship difficulties with their partner or difficult relationships with their own parents. Meanwhile, sleep deprivation, isolation and financial concerns can exacerbate the condition.

Another reason for male postnatal depression is a reaction to a partner's own postnatal depression. Half of all men with a partner suffering from PND will suffer from it themselves, and children with two depressed parents are at an elevated risk of social, psychological and cognitive deficits.

BIGGER PICTURE

PND has traditionally been thought of as a women's problem, primarily because it was once believed to be the consequence of hormonal changes that occurred during pregnancy and after birth. That view has changed.

"Hormonal changes are only a small part of a much bigger picture, hence the reason that men suffer from PND as well," Horton says. "There are a whole range of factors involved. Biological, psychological, social and emotional issues come to the fore after a baby is born."

PND in men can manifest in a number of ways, such as mood swings, anger, drug taking and drinking, becoming withdrawn, working longer hours to avoid being at home, excessive socialising, lethargy, anxiety attacks, loss of sex drive and difficulty in concentration.

"Men can become overwhelmed by their feelings and seek escape from this new reality," Dunn says. "Their day-to-day function is disrupted, so much so that there are noticeable personality changes."

So how do you differentiate between PND and the normal stresses of parenthood?

"Often couples will explain away depression and anxiety as normal difficulties that come with having a new baby, such as being overtired," Horton says. "But if it has been longer than a two-week period, then proper assessment for PND should be undertaken."

Another issue that exacerbates male PND is

the changing of the relationship between the man and the woman after the baby is born.

"The woman gets caught up with the baby and the man can feel excluded when suddenly his partner is focusing all of her attention on another. Thus begins the slow, insidious erosion of their relationship."

GETTING HELP

Dunn says it's often much harder for men to be identified as suffering from PND than women, as women come into contact with health professionals, such as their obstetrician, midwife, or healthcare worker, who may pick up the signs, whereas men, who find it harder to articulate their feelings, especially when it comes to anxiety and depression, often tend to struggle on without support.

One of the most important factors in treating postnatal depression is admitting that there is a problem. "We often talk about joy and celebration, but there is also the issue of the loss of your old life when a baby is born," Dunn says. "It's natural that there is going to be sadness and emotional adjustment to your new life. A major problem is the guilt around that sadness, which can set off anxiety and depression. If there is a period of time of emotional distress, parents need to be made aware that it's okay to reach out for help and support."

If depression is left untreated, it can lead to devastating consequences for the entire family.

Help is available. "Men and women suffering from PND are treated using therapy or counselling, sometimes in conjunction with antidepressants," Dunn says. "Becoming part of a support group and realising that you're not alone and that others have experienced the same thoughts and feelings can also really help you on the road to recovery."

WHERE TO GET HELP

For telephone information, support and referral service, call Panda on 1300 726 306 or visit www.panda.org.au. For more information on postnatal depression, visit www.gidgetfoundation.com.au



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IT HAPPENED TO ME

For Adam Stevens, 29, from Port Macquarie, NSW, it was a case of gaining a baby and losing his partner.*

■ *"I was excited about the birth of our first child, but when Gabe, now four, was born and the initial euphoria wore off, I was overwhelmed by negative feelings. Gabe had colic and screamed constantly. Whenever I held him, he seemed to scream even more. I remember thinking that we'd made a mistake having a child. I felt like Anna, my wife, had forgotten I existed. I was kicked out of our bed and ended up sleeping on the sofa.*

"There was so much shame involved. How could I hate my son? It made me hate myself. When Gabe was three months, I became severely depressed and withdrawn. I eventually went to a doctor. I had not even heard of male PND and was relieved that I wasn't this horrendous person.

"I started counselling, became involved in a support group and learnt to deal with my feelings. Once I got help, I found my feelings for my son changed and now I can honestly say I love being a dad."

** Name changed*



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[5% The incidence of depressive disorders in new fathers at six weeks post-partum **]**

