

Treating Antenatal Anxiety and Depression

Following diagnosis, it is vital for the father to seek support and treatment for how he has been feeling as soon as possible.

Talking about how he has been feeling with a trusted person will allow his partner, friends and family/whanau the opportunity to be supportive. Talking to the midwife, doctor or other care provider about how he has been feeling is important for seeking help.

Look after himself. PND affects a fathers' feelings. One of the symptoms of depression can be a feeling of detachment from everyday things. The father may not feel connected with his new baby, which makes him unsure of his own needs. He may be missing the emotional intimacy and support of his partner. Hugs and holding, staying active and eating healthily can all make a real difference to how you feel.

Support groups. If the couple connect with a support group, or if the mother is receiving psycho-social support, it is important that the father participates or talks to another father who has been in the same situation. This will help to reinforce that he is not alone and help safeguard his physical health or the couple may learn strategies to help them support each other.

Consider therapy or other help. If a father has tried to work through things on his own but is still not feeling right, sharing with a father support group, seeing a therapist or a counsellor may be of real benefit. Some fathers may also be offered a course of antidepressants.

When he needs to seek help quickly. If the father is seriously worried about his partner, feeling disoriented and struggling with daily life, or if he is having panic attacks, he should contact a midwife or a doctor immediately.

If you believe there is immediate risk of harm to the father, the mother, her baby or to others, contact the Crisis Team, ED, Oranga Tamariki, or Police as soon as possible.

Although paternal depression could not induce harm to their unborn child, it may affect their partner's mental health and the development of their children.

Paternal depression around baby time is linked to relationships, prior mental health issues and stress during the pregnancy.

Fathers should be reassured that seeing a therapist or psychiatrist is not a sign of weakness, but probably needed to keep himself and his family safe and healthy.



Data in this publication sourced from:

- Kidz Need Dadz NZ
- Growing Up in New Zealand
- Best Practice Advocacy Centre New Zealand
- PADA Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Aotearoa
- PANDA Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia



Dads and postnatal depression

The risk of postnatal anxiety and depression in mothers is well documented, but Auckland University researchers from the longitudinal Growing Up in New Zealand study have found 2.3 per cent of fathers also experience depression during the pregnancy, and this reaches 4.3 percent nine months after their child is born. Other international studies put this figure even higher, suggesting that up to 1 in 10 new dads struggle with depression following the birth of their baby.

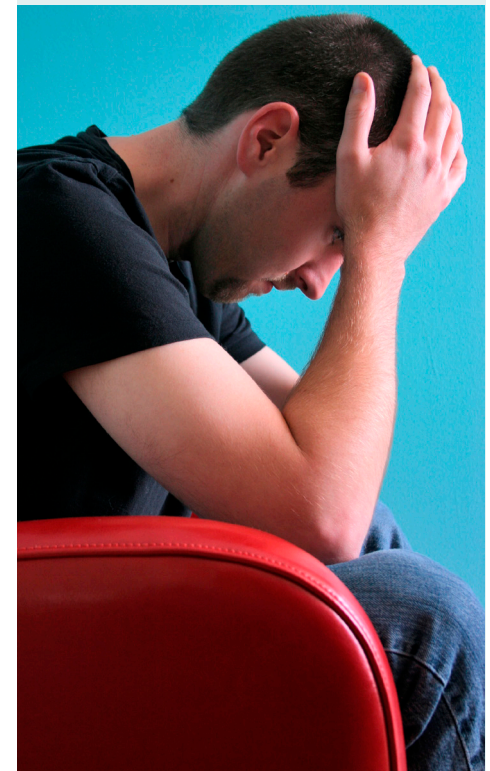
In a survey of 3500 Kiwi men, researchers investigated symptoms of depression in the third trimester of their partner's pregnancy and again nine months after the birth. Fathers most at risk of depression symptoms either felt stressed or were in poor health, although postnatal depression was also influenced by relationship factors. Although paternal depression could not induce harm to their unborn child, it may affect their partner's mental health and the ongoing development of their children.

From early pregnancy and after baby is born, an involved father can help, support or arrange to meet the needs of both the mother and child. A fully informed father is vital to recovery from birth or through relationship changes and perinatal adjustment.

Men's lack of awareness of how their relationship changes after baby is born is increasingly recognised as a factor in relationship break downs. Having a child is a major transition in the new parents' relationship, their family dynamic is altered forever, this can include important cultural or spiritual rituals, but some couples may not understand or anticipate the changes.

Misunderstandings around baby time may be based on:

- New parents ideas of themselves and their roles
- Expectations of each other as a parent and/or partner
- New mothers recovery, support or mental health needs



PADA

Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Aotearoa is the national organisation committed to eliminating the stigma around perinatal mental health in New Zealand. We do this by championing awareness and facilitating best practice in perinatal mental health and wellbeing to ensure all families/whanau have access to appropriate information and support.

This resource is available to care professionals to assist in raising awareness of anxiety and depression in fathers.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of Kidz Need Dadz NZ in preparing this resource.

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Postnatal depression - either direct or indirect

Fathers can be affected by postnatal depression either directly or indirectly. Where they are affected indirectly (through their partner's depression) common issues are:

- Not knowing how to help a partner through her depression.
- Attempts to help or diagnose are frustrated or met with evasion.
- Disappointment: a father expects a baby to be a joyful event, and result in a happy time. He may feel his partner does not share the idea or is unavailable and distant.
- Partner's anxieties 'rub off' on him and he feels agitated but not sure why.
- Feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities, partly by partner's altered needs and functionality.

A father may have long days at work and feel he has the baby thrown into his arms as soon as he comes home. Some fathers may go without sleep, or come home to a partner that does not seem to be coping and his ability to function as a parent may be reduced.

At the core of such adjustment problems for men are often:

- Uncertainty about their role (how much or how little does their partner want help).
- Getting mixed messages about his role from friends, family, media.
- His own understanding of fatherhood not matching expectations.
- Bonding with baby is frustrated by an exclusive mother-baby bond.
- He may feel he is not earning enough to make him useful enough.
- Reality differs from his expectations, his initial relationship with the baby is difficult.
- He is unable to help or resolve problems with his partner, and may feel a failure.
- Feeling trapped in relationship he was unsure about, even if he is a keen father.
- Not recognising or foreseeing signs of depression in his partner.

Things to ask fathers who are supporting a partner with PND

Questions you may ask a father who has a partner with postnatal depression:

- What is it like to come home from work at the moment?
- Does she appreciate your efforts to help?
- How do you feel about having a baby?
- Are you worried about baby?
- Do you know how to support her through her PND?
- Do you want to know more about postnatal depression?



Postnatal depression - recognising the signs

While anxiety and depression appears differently for each expecting and new dad, some of the common symptoms can be:

- Constant tiredness or exhaustion
- Ongoing headache. High physical stress levels e.g. muscle tension
- Loss of interest in things that were once enjoyed
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep problems (unrelated to baby's sleep)
- Ongoing irritability, anger or moodiness
- Emotional withdrawal from your partner, baby, family, friends
- Fear of looking after your baby
- Not wanting to communicate with your partner, family and friends
- Feeling isolated
- Using alcohol or drugs to 'escape' or cope
- Suicidal thoughts

Factors that contribute to antenatal anxiety and depression

- Family or personal history of depression
- Relationship difficulties
- Stressful life events
- Poor health
- Unemployment
- Past history of abuse
- Lack of social support
- Financial difficulties

Pathways for supporting families/whanau

All health professionals who may come into contact with families/whanau - midwives, obstetricians, GPs, Well Child providers, psychologists and social workers - have the opportunity to inform, engage with and assess fathers during pregnancy or after the birth. If you are concerned about a father, make sure they access support and advice as soon as possible.

Contact your local Specialist Mental Health Service for advice about services available in your area. These organisations may also help:

- Kidz Need Dadz NZ – 09 525 1690
- Lifeline (open 24/7) – 0800 543 354
- Depression Helpline (open 24/7) – 0800 111 757
- Healthline (open 24/7) – 0800 611 116
- Samaritans (open 24/7) – 0800 726 666
- Suicide Crisis Helpline (open 24/7) – 0508 828 865

What the numbers tell us

THE NUMBER OF BIRTHS IN NEW ZEALAND IN 2019:

58,020

THE PERCENTAGE OF FATHERS WHO EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION DURING THEIR PARTNERS' PREGNANCY :

2.3%

THE PERCENTAGE OF MEN WHO CAN EXPERIENCE HIGH LEVELS OF DEPRESSION AFTER CHILDBIRTH:

4.3%

PERCENTAGE OF PREGNANT WOMEN WITH SEVERE DEPRESSION:

12%

PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO SUFFER WITH DEPRESSION IN PREGNANCY WHO DEVELOP POSTNATAL DEPRESSION:

50%