



# Mental Health and the New Father

Becoming a parent is a huge milestone for anyone, but when a new baby joins the family, it's common for support systems to prioritize the mother and child. Even many health professionals educate moms on what to expect during the transition to motherhood, while the transition to fatherhood is primarily addressed in the context of supporting the mother and baby – if it is at all.

Between the lack of education about the challenges of fatherhood and societal pressures of masculinity, dads don't always pay attention to their mental health after bringing a child into the family. While they may notice changes in their mood and behavior, they might not recognize them as symptoms of a mental health condition. Many don't even know that men can experience pre- and postpartum depression and anxiety – around one in 10 fathers experience Paternal Postpartum Depression (PPPD) and up to 16% deal with an anxiety disorder during the weeks before and after birth.<sup>1</sup>

## FAST FACTS

- ▶ Approximately **75 million** men in the United States are **fathers** – that's about **60% of all men over age 15**.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ There are around **2 million single fathers** in the U.S. – about 40% are divorced, 38% never married, 15% separated, and 6% widowed.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ The **average age** at which men become **fathers has increased** over time – from 27.4 years old in 1972, to 30.9 years old in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

## COMMON STRESSORS

### Drastic Life Changes

Often the feelings of love and joy that a new baby brings are mixed with feelings of frustration and regret over losing your old life. There's an adjustment period for everyone when a new member joins the family. Overnight, you become much less in control of how you spend your time than you were before. This lifestyle change can be especially jarring if you're a first-time parent. Most fathers find their expectations of parenthood to be very different than reality.

Talk to other dads or new parents – they are likely navigating similar changes and stresses. If you don't personally know any other new fathers or fathers of young children:

- Search for support groups. There may be local groups that meet in person, or you can look online. Facebook is a good place to start.
- Introduce yourself to other dads. Try striking up a conversation while picking your child up from daycare or at child-centered community events. If your child's mother has mommy friends, see if she can introduce you to their partners.

### Guilt Around Bonding

Bonding with a newborn is often more difficult for fathers than mothers, especially if the mother carried the child – men miss out on a lot of direct connection with the baby during pregnancy and soon after birth, from carrying and birthing the baby to breastfeeding. It's also uncommon for men to take significant time off work after the birth of their child. Paid paternity leave is not standard for most companies, and while 90% of new fathers take some time off, 70% take ten days or less<sup>5</sup>, which is fewer than the weeks of maternity leave a woman typically takes. If you are having a hard time feeling close to your baby and feelings of guilt arise, it may be tempting to withdraw even further. Try not to be too hard on yourself if you don't feel a quick connection with your baby. While men generally spend more time with their young children now than in past generations, it's entirely normal for it to take weeks or months to develop an intimate emotional bond with your baby.

Mothers have a head start when bonding with a baby, but there are plenty of ways to grow a strong father-child connection.

- Skin-to-skin contact is important for babies and a great way to initiate a bond – let the baby snuggle against your bare chest and feel your heartbeat.
- If you spoke to the baby in the womb, they will likely already recognize your voice; continuing to talk to them (or read, or sing) helps that bond grow.
- Make alone time for you and the baby (it will give your partner a break, too!) – be in charge of bath time, take over some of the feeds if mom isn't exclusively breastfeeding, or wear the baby in a carrier while doing light tasks around the house.

### Relationship Changes

There are non-stop household chores and baby duties to take care of with a new baby and sleep deprivation on top of everything else. You're probably bickering more than before, and what used to be couple time is now family time. You and your partner likely both feel like you're doing your best to take

care of the many things that need to get done. Still, sometimes it can feel like your partner isn't doing enough, which can quickly lead to resentment – especially when you aren't getting the quality time that relationships need.

Make an effort to talk with your partner about things other than the baby and parenthood, even if it's just a few minutes each day. It doesn't have to be a whole date night (but if you have a sitter, go for it!) – you can chat while pushing the baby around the block in the stroller or spend a few minutes before you go to bed each night catching up. Planning regular “meetings” to bring up household- and baby-related issues can help you and your partner keep parent-talk to a minimum during your quality time.

## Loneliness & Isolation

Many parents struggle with feeling isolated in the chaos of bringing a newborn home – your life becomes consumed with caring for the baby. You may feel disconnected from your friends, your partner, and even yourself. Few people talk about the transition from a father's point of view, but your feelings about new parenthood are valid too.

Remember that while your primary identity may be ‘Dad’ right now, you were you first, and it's important not to lose that. Take time for yourself to do things you enjoy and connect with others who make you feel understood. This may mean finding a babysitter for a few hours or taking turns watching the baby so you and your partner can each get some “me time.” It can be hard to prioritize yourself when there is a seemingly never-ending list of things to be done but taking care of yourself means you can give your child an even better version of you.

## Protector & Provider Expectations

Fathers often face significant stress related to their work and income when a new child joins the family. There can be a lot of pressure for fathers to be the protector, provider, and disciplinarian of the family, both from external parties and yourself. Because the child's mother has gone through the physically demanding part of bringing a child into the world, fathers often feel increased pressure to compensate in some way once the baby arrives. Children are expensive – your spending likely increased significantly when the baby arrived and it's easy to feel like you're drowning in payments, especially if money was already tight. Remember that these days, the burden of financially providing for a family no longer needs to fall entirely on you – the lines between your duties and your partner's duties are less rigid than they used to be.

Take time regularly to reflect on your priorities – let the little things go and give yourself credit for the successes you have had as a new parent. Things can easily spiral out of control when you don't have systems in place, and while it can be hard to get yourself to slow down, putting in some extra time and effort now will likely save you time down the road – work out a realistic budget to see where you can shift money to account for new expenses, reexamine your savings priorities, and have regular check-ins with your partner and anyone else in your financial support system.

## Parenting Anxiety

Nearly all parents deal with the fear that they will mess up – you're likely to experience doubts and feelings of inadequacy at some point during your fatherhood journey. No one can be entirely prepared for parenthood before it happens to them.

When feelings of doubt set in, it can be hard to gather the mental energy to be the type of father you want to be. Feeling more informed and confident about what to expect can go a long way – familiarize yourself with [basic developmental milestones](#) and be as engaged with the baby as possible. Successful parenting is less about being prepared for every problem and more about adapting and recovering from challenges. Accept that things won't always go as planned and that you can't fix everything. Focus on stress management – move your body, make sure to eat enough, and remind yourself that you're doing the best you can.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Life transitions are really difficult for our brains to process and feeling overwhelmed with all the change you're experiencing in early fatherhood is completely normal, and you should not be ashamed. Check out Kevin Seldon's podcast, [Dad I'd Like To Friend](#), for relatable and honest content on parenthood.

However, if these feelings have you feeling unable to function, it might be time to seek professional mental health help. Take an online screen at [mhascreening.org](#) to determine if you're dealing with symptoms of a mental health condition – you can show your results to a doctor to begin the conversation.

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## Sources

<sup>1</sup>National Institute for Children's Health Quality. (2021). *Promoting fathers' mental health during children's early childhood*. <https://www.nichq.org/insight/promoting-fathers-mental-health-during-childrens-early-childhood>

<sup>2</sup>Monte, L.M. & Knop, B. (2019). *Men's fertility and fatherhood: Current population reports*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/demo/P70-162.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>United States Census Bureau. (2021, October 8). *Fathers in the United States*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sis/resources/news/fathers.html>

<sup>4</sup>Khandwala, Y.S., Zhang, C.A., Lu, Y., & Eisenberg, M.L. (2017). The age of fathers in the USA is rising: an analysis of 168,867,480 births from 1972 to 2015. *Human Reproduction*, 32(10), 2110-2116. DOI: 10.1093/humrep/dex267

<sup>5</sup>Grose, J. (2020, February 19). *Why dads don't take parental leave*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/19/parenting/why-dads-dont-take-parental-leave.html>