

Help-seeking as relationship-saving

opposing perspectives within the intimate relationship when fathers suffer from postnatal depression

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Introduction:

- Current guidance recommends that professionals screen and support mothers during the antenatal and postnatal periods for their mental health ¹
- Despite recommendations that father mental health is assessed ², this is not currently routine or implemented -leaving a gap in support for fathers
- The current knowledge about fathers' unmet mental health needs and relationship dynamics which result from this are unclear

Fathers and mental health:

- Historically, only mothers have been considered to experience perinatal mental ill health
- This has changed more recently
- Fatherhood is a time of unique change, expectation, and stress
- Balancing work and home is an identified challenge ³ which fathers conceptualize as normative “stress” ⁴
- Our research was on fathers’ experiences with postnatal depression ⁵ and their help seeking experiences for PND ⁶

Fathers' experiences of PND

- Fathers describe experiencing PND as a time of despair, misery, and feeling trapped
- Fathers experienced suicidal thinking and plans
- They experienced poor bonding with the infant and a disappointment with the reality of fatherhood
- This was further characterized by behaviour changes including overworking and avoiding the home, or exercising more and being at the gym, and avoiding handling the baby
- Fathers felt alone, unsupported, and helpless

Men's relationships during PND

- Despite their suffering men did not want to share their difficulties
- They felt a pressure to protect their partner, particularly emphasizing that their partner had gone through the birth/breastfeeding and considering them as having more need
- They experienced an emotional distancing and lack of intimacy, stating there was no relationship outside of caring for the baby
- It was unclear how their partners perceived this time, but some fathers described their partners as being distressed from breastfeeding, tired having cared for the baby while they were at work.

Fathers' helpseeking for PND⁶

- Men tried to cope alone
- Their usual coping mechanisms became difficult to apply with a baby (e.g. socializing, reading quietly)
- They believed it would get better eventually (it didn't)
- Their functioning was getting worse meaning coping got harder
- They felt guilt and shame at not functioning as a father or partner, describing a need to be strong

Role of the partner understandings from fathers

- Men consider spouses as supporting their help concerns⁷ and influencing their help-seeking⁸
- The relationship dynamics of this are unclear
- In our studies it was clear the fathers' partners were upset by their PND and wanted them to seek help^{5,6}
- Partners were the first to recognize PND
- They asked fathers to visit the GP
- In two cases women threatened to leave the father if he didn't seek help

Role of the partner understandings from mothers⁹

- Our recruitment of mothers for interviews was not successful
- We examined mothering forums for posts where fathers were perceived as experiencing PND
- Mothers suspected PND based on changes in fathers' character, emotions and behaviour
- They observed a lack of bond between father and baby
- Mothers asked advice based on frustration, feeling unsupported, a sense of helplessness and having waited for a difficult situation to change

Opposing perspectives to PND help-seeking:

- Both partners suffer when fathers experience PND
- Fathers try to cope alone and hide their symptoms
- Mothers are aware of their symptoms and urge them to seek help
- Fathers are resistant to help -seeking as it is exposing, shameful, and they do not believe they are “ill”
- Mothers perceive this as a lack of prioritization of the family and feel helpless and alone
- These differences damage relationships in early parenthood

What does our research add?

- There are different parental expectations after a baby is born when fathers are unwell with PND
- Gendered expectations and parenting roles result in opposing perspectives to both the PND experience and resultant help seeking
- These opposing views can result in resentment and relationship damage
- Both parents would benefit from mental health and relationship support during the transition to parenthood

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| Thank you

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