

Postpartum Depression in Men - Symptoms, Causes, & Steps to Healing PPD in Men | Ep. 81

Introduction: The Overlooked Struggles of New Fathers

When was the last time that you asked a new dad how he was doing? Not, how's the baby? Not how is mom coping, but how are you really? We often picture fathers as the steady anchor, while mothers weather the postpartum storm. But research tells a different story. Around 1 in 10 dads experience postpartum depression or anxiety. Their pain just tends to hide behind different masks irritability, anger, workaholism, risk taking or silence. And because we've taught men that being strong means being stoic, many suffer quietly convinced that they are just bad at this dad thing.

So in today's episode of the Parenthood and Relationship Podcast, we're lifting that silence. We'll talk about why fathers can spiral into depression or anxiety during pregnancy or after birth, how it shows up in ways we often miss, and what both dads and mothers can do, what couples can do, to heal together. This isn't about comparing pain. It's about completing the picture. Because when we include fathers in the conversation, every parent and every partner feels seen.

Hi there. If this is your first time here, welcome to the Parenthood and Relationship Podcast. I'm your host, Marcella Kani, a psychologist, a parenthood and relationship coach, and a parent myself. Together we explore the transformative journey of parenthood and its profound impact on our relationship with ourselves, our partners, and our children, so that we can be present and show up as we envision without having to do more.

Let's get into today's episode.

Understanding Paternal Postpartum Depression

So let's start with what we mean by paternal postpartum depression. Because This is not just something that happens to mothers. Paternal postpartum depression describes depressive symptoms that appear during a partner's pregnancy or within the first year after birth. About one in 10 men experience it and studies show that it often peaks

when the baby is around three to six months old. But here is where it gets tricky.

Symptoms and Signs to Watch For

Men's symptoms don't look like sadness. They might show up as sudden irritability or anger, working excessively or using substances more. Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach issues or exhaustion ; social withdrawal or loss of motivation. Or in more severe cases, we may have thoughts of ending one's life. Many fathers also experience anxiety, not the occasional worry, but the persistent fear, the racing thoughts, even panic attacks.

Sometimes it looks like over researching everything or double checking the baby's breathing 10 times a night.

And just like moms dads can also have the baby blues. But if those feelings last more than a couple of weeks or start affecting daily life, it is time to get help. Crucially, paternal depression can start before the baby is even born. Pregnancy is a transition for fathers too, one that often stirs old insecurities about responsibility, identity, and worth.

Personal Stories: The Hidden Pain of Fathers

Let me bring this to life with a glimpse of what it feels like on the inside.

I've sat with dads who seemed perfectly fine on the outside, showing up to work, making jokes, taking the baby for walks, but whose eyes told a different story. There's this kind of quiet exhaustion that doesn't show up on baby monitors or in blood tests. It's the exhaustion of holding it all together.

Take Peter for example. He had always defined himself as the dependable one, calm, rational, the rock. When his son was born, that identity cracked a little. The baby cried whenever he held him. His wife was breastfeeding and seemed to have this natural rhythm that he couldn't join in . So he did what made sense in his world.

He worked harder. He told himself "If I can't soothe him, then I'll provide for him." But the nights got longer. He'd sit in the car after work, scrolling on his phone, unable to get in the house. At home, he would avoid eye contact. His wife would tell him, "You don't care," and he would snap back. "I am doing everything for this family."

Then he would retreat into silence, angry, ashamed, and deeply alone. Months later, in a session that we had together, he said something that I'll never forget. " I thought depression meant sadness, and I wasn't sad, I was angry, numb, and tired. I just didn't know that these could be symptoms, too." His story is not unusual. It's a portrait of a man losing access to himself while trying to be who everyone expects him to be.

And then there's Joe who spent years imagining the moment that he would become a father when it finally happened , he expected joy to flood his chest. Instead, he felt fear, thick and unrelenting. He found himself double checking the baby's breathing, sanitizing everything twice lying awake long after the baby had fallen asleep.

When his partner laughed and said, "Come on, you're overreacting," he laughed too, but inside his mind was a carousel of what ifs. What if I'm not enough? What if something happens on my watch?

He didn't know that what he was experiencing had a name. Postpartum anxiety and that these intrusive thoughts are often the mind's way of trying to protect what it loves most.

Between these two men are thousands more. Some who work longer hours, some who disappear into their phones, some who become short tempered, and some others who just feel nothing at all.

But what ties them together is the same invisible thread. They don't call it depression. They call it failure. Failure to cope, failure to feel happy when they're supposed to, failure

to protect or provide in the way they imagined. And the tragedy is that their partners often misread the signs. Withdrawal looks like indifference, irritability looks like selfishness. Numbness looks like not caring. So the distance widens even as both are quietly breaking . Sometimes all it takes to interrupt that spiral is one person's curiosity one person saying, "You have seemed off lately. How are you really?" Not to fix him or her not to offer advice, but just to see him or her. That is often the moment that something shifts.

There is an exhale maybe for the first time in months . Maybe that is when he gets to realize he's not defective. He's just overwhelmed, scared and human. And that's the piece that we often miss. Men don't stop caring when they withdraw, although I get it that that's what it looks like. It's because they care so much that they don't know how to carry it.

If you're listening and you recognize a version of yourself in these stories or a version of your husband or partner.

Remember that this depression or anxiety doesn't always announce itself with tears.

It looks like snapping, zoning out, getting irritable over nothing. Being frustrated, feeling invisible in the home. It doesn't mean you're weak. It means you're a human in a world that hasn't taught men what to do with their pain.

So before we move on to the deeper causes, let's just pause here for a second.

Ask yourself, when was the last time that I let someone see the part of me that is tired? The part of me that feels like it is holding everything and still dropping something. That question alone can be the start of healing.

So let's pause here. If father struggles are often unseen, what is really happening underneath?

The Causes Behind Paternal Depression

Why do some dads slip into depression or anxiety after a baby is born when everything on paper says they should be fine?

The truth is, it's rarely one thing. It's a perfect storm. Instead it's biological, emotional, social, financial. All of these colliding at the same time that a man is told to step up.

So for one, there's the unseen biology. We don't talk about this enough. Men's hormones also shift in parenthood. When their partner is pregnant and after the baby is born, testosterone drops sometimes by as much as 30%. Prolactin and oxytocin rise to prepare him for nurturing. This is nature's way of saying be here, be tender. But there's a flip side. Low testosterone can bring fatigue, low motivation, even sadness.

And because we don't associate these symptoms with fatherhood, men often blame themselves. "Why am I so tired? Why can't I get it together?" They don't realize that their body is recalibrating for caregiving, just like a mother's only without the socio permission to slow down or to ask for support. It's a quiet biological shift with loud emotional consequences.

And then there is emotional contagion. This is the shared emotional field between partners. Research shows that up to half of fathers whose partners experience postpartum depression, develop symptoms themselves, not because depression is actually contagious, but because empathy is.

When one parent sinks into despair or exhaustion, the other often absorbs that emotional weight. They start over-functioning, taking on more, worrying more, quietly burning out. I sometimes describe this as emotional osmosis. If your partner can't breathe eventually you find yourself holding your breath, too.

So what we see in therapy is not just one person's depression, but a systemic exhaustion. A family that is stretched thin, trying to keep everyone afloat.

Now, third is the disconnection paradox. Early parenthood can be profoundly lonely for fathers as well. Babies arrive needing their mothers, at least physically, especially if they're breastfeeding and that primal bond can leave dads on the sidelines. They're there, but they're not quite in it. In sessions, fathers say things like, "I didn't know where to stand," or "Every time I tried to help, she corrected me. I wanted to bond, but I always felt

like a guest." It's heartbreaking because most of them want to be involved. They're not avoiding care. They're avoiding rejection.

And the more excluded they feel, the less they try. The less they try, the more their partner feels alone, and around they go. A loop of misunderstandings starts to drain them and create disconnection.

The irony, the very thing that parents crave, closeness, that becomes the thing that they both fear they cannot give.

Fourth is the identity crisis. Parenthood reshapes, everyone's sense of self, but

men are rarely guided through that transformation, we celebrate the "provider identity," but we don't prepare them for the identity loss that comes when providing is no longer enough. Many fathers describe it like this. "I used to know who I was. Now I don't recognize myself." This is not self-pity. It's grief. Grief for the freedom that's gone, the relationship that's changing, the man that they thought they would be.

But because culture doesn't give men permission to grieve, it gets expressed as irritability, withdrawal, or cynicism. We label it as disinterest, but it's actually mourning. Parenthood isn't about gaining a role. It's about losing an old one and loss when unacknowledged can turn into despair.

A fifth cause is the physiology of the depletion. And of course, there is this practical side that no one escapes sleep deprivation. Sleep loss alone can alter mood. It disregulates hormones, it increases anxiety, it can make the calmest person on edge.

Now add the pressure of returning to work, balancing bills, and trying to be there at home, it's a setup for burnout. Fathers often joke about being tired, but underneath the humor is sometimes genuine dysregulation. You cannot pour from an empty cup, from an empty nervous system, yet many dads do. And they break.

Sixth is the emotional inheritance. We also have to consider the past. For men who grew up without emotional safety, fatherhood can reopen old wounds. If they never had a father

who comforted them, or a mother who allowed them to feel, becoming a parent can be confronting. Suddenly they're holding a baby who depends on them for the very thing they never received, emotional attunement. And their inner child whispers, "I don't know how to do this. No one did this for me." That's not incompetence. It's trauma echoing through generations. When we bring compassion to that truth, healing begins not just for the man but for the whole lineage.

And then of course, there's the silence of expectations. That is perhaps the most corrosive cause of all - the cultural script. We still glorify stoicism in men - the uncomplaining worker, the one who just gets on with it, that's the good man, the good father. But here's the problem. Silence doesn't make pain disappear. It just buries it until it surfaces as rage, numbness, or distance. When I ask fathers "Who supports you?," the most common answer I hear is "No one's ever asked me that before." We hand men responsibility for the entire family, but rarely offer them belonging within it. We tell them to step up, but we never ask, what do you need to feel steady while you do?

So, when a father breaks down months after the baby's birth, when he's irritable, detached, or strangely reckless, it's not a personal flaw. That is what I hope you keep from this. It's a consequence of too much responsibility, too little rest, too few words, and almost no models of vulnerability. This is not about blame, it is about context.

When we understand the why, we shift from judgment to empathy, and that is what allows healing. Because the truth is paternal, postpartum depression isn't rare. It is just hidden behind the armor that men were taught to wear. And when that armor starts to crack, what spills out isn't weakness, it is humanity. So before we move on to what we can do to help, let's take a breath. Let's think of the fathers that you know, friends, brothers, partners, colleagues.

How many of them might be struggling quietly behind their competence and their humor? How many might need someone to finally notice? Because once we begin to see the fuller picture, the biology, the pressure, the inherited silence, we stop asking "what's wrong with him," and we start asking, "what's happened to him?" That is where real support begins.

So what can we do when dad is struggling?

Steps to Support Struggling Fathers

For one, we need to normalize the conversation. Ask fathers how they're really doing, and ask twice. Because the first answer is usually, I'm fine. Share this with your partner or with a friend. It's an easy way to open the door.

Secondly, screen and seek support. There are simple tools like the Edinburg Postnatal Depression Scale, or the Gotland Male Depression Scale. If symptoms last more than two weeks, or if there are thoughts of self-harm, please reach out to a GP or a mental health professional. Therapy helps and so does couples work.

Thirdly involve dads in caregiving. Nothing heals disconnection like participation, skin to skin contact, bathtime, bedtime rituals. These moments release oxytocin and build confidence. If you are a mom listening to this episode, notice if you are unintentionally gatekeeping. Try to let go of control and trust that your partner's different way isn't the wrong way.

Number four, reconnect as a couple. As I always say, you don't need grand gestures, just 15 minute rituals - tea after bedtime, a walk, laughing at a silly video. Mini dates rebuild emotional intimacy, even when you're exhausted.

Number five, share the mental load. Make the invisible visible. And you know what? Write down everything that keeps your household running and divide it by ownership, not tasks . When you as the father own part of the system , you feel invested and competent rather than peripheral.

Six, choose healthy coping, exercise journaling, mindfulness or simply talking to a trusted friend can do wonders. Replace risky behaviors with grounding ones like joining a father group or doing something creative with your hands.

You can also find father circles. There are online and local groups that exist just for dads spaces where you don't feel judged. Postpartum support International has wonderful resources for men. You're not alone in this.

Then you can also advocate for better systems - longer paternity leave , flexible work and routine screening for dads shouldn't be luxuries. They're public health needs. When we raise our voices, policies change.

Conclusion: Empathy and Support for All Parents

As we come to an end , you may be thinking, why focus on dads when mothers still struggle for recognition?

And the answer is because mental health isn't a competition. When fathers suffer in silence, the whole family feels it. Mothers will have to carry more mental load. Children sense the tension and relationships fray. But when fathers are supported and emotionally present, everything shifts. Children thrive, couples communicate better, and society begins to see caregiving as a shared human responsibility, not as a gendered one.

So this isn't about dividing empathy. It's actually about multiplying it.

I want to leave you with a gentle question. What assumptions do you carry about what father should do after a baby arrives?

About how they should behave? If you've ever thought " I should just get on with it; he should just get on with it." Pause. Pain doesn't have to be compared to be valid. If you are a dad listening right now and some parts of this episode, hit home, please take this as a sign. There's nothing wrong with you.

You're human. And getting help is not weakness. It is leadership. It's love in action. Talk to someone, your partner, your friend, your gp, a counselor. Get in touch with me. You deserve support just as much as anyone else. And if you would like to keep deepening these conversations. I share a free weekly reflection in the Sunday Reconnect my newsletter, one insight, one exclusive tool, and one three minute reset to help you feel closer to yourself and the people you love. You will find it at markellakaplani.com/newsletter.

For dads specifically , the Reconnection Roadmap, a free guide that I created to help men rebuild affection and admiration in their relationships can help you get closer, one action at a time. You can find it at markellakaplani.com/resources.

Be sure you stick around and you subscribe to the channel so that you don't miss another episode.

At the end of this month, I have an amazing guest joining so that we can talk about fathers and how we can support them and how they can support their wives, their partners in this journey.

And next episode we talk about sharing the mental load, so make sure you're tuned in. Until then, take care of your mind, your body, and of each other- because your wellbeing is your family's wellbeing. I'll see you next Sunday. Bye-bye.