

Even Daddies Get the Blues

Mothers aren't the only ones to suffer from PPD

Before his son was born, Walter Nissen envisioned himself as being the perfect dad who would love his child no matter what and would help his wife in every way he could. Instead, he hated his son for months after his birth and resented his wife.

The 31-year-old Livermore resident was suffering from the male version of postpartum depression, a mental illness some new moms experience because of chemical changes in their body.

"I had to frequently remove myself from caring for him because I felt like I was going to lash out. Just him not going to sleep or crying would make me angry," Nissen says. "Thank God I didn't hurt him."

Often referred to as Paternal Postnatal Depression (PPND), this condition doesn't differ much from PPD in mothers. Fathers with depression may exhibit symptoms immediately after their child's birth or even a year later.

The symptoms, however, can differ in men and women. While moms may cry a lot and be more expressive about their depression, dads may get angry frequently, drink excessively, gamble or work obsessively, according to experts.

A study in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* in 2008 showed that 10 percent of fathers exhibited elevated levels of depressive symptoms when their child was 9 months old, compared to 14 percent of mothers.

For Nissen, the depression caught him by surprise. He had always been a happy guy and had never been seriously depressed. Even after he decided to see a psychiatrist when his son was 6 months old, he didn't think his problem was depression.

"I didn't feel sad. I felt upset and angry," Nissen says. "I didn't realize I was suffering from depression until I started taking

antidepressants and they worked. I felt much better and had a great time with my son."

It's not a female thing

Many experts say that one of the biggest problems with depression in new dads is it often goes untreated because many men think only women suffer from PPD. Some men are also ashamed because they don't want to be seen as weak. And others just don't realize they are suffering from depression.

Berkeley psychotherapist Will Courtenay started *saddaddy.com*, a Web site for those experiencing PPND, after he started seeing new dads in his practice who were suffering from depression and wanted to know why this problem wasn't being discussed more openly. The Web site has an online forum for fathers to talk about their problems anonymously with other dads.

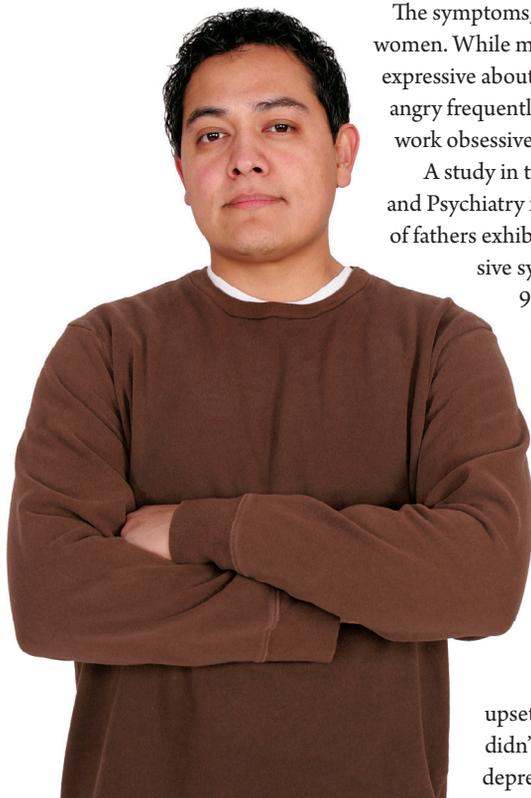
"One of the greatest myths is that men don't want to talk about it, but they really do," Courtenay says. "It's a myth, but it's a self-fulfilling prophesy. Men think they shouldn't talk about it."

Often it's the mother's depression that causes the father to be depressed, says Shoshana Bennett, a clinical psychologist in Bodega Bay specializing in prenatal mood and anxiety disorders and author of the book *Postpartum Depression for Dummies* (Wiley Publishing, Inc.). But often, Bennett says, the father's depression doesn't surface until a year after the child is born.

"He may be trying to hold it together for the mom," she says. "When mom gets better, he may start to unravel."

Just like women, Courtenay says men can experience a chemical change in their body after their child is born. Late in the pregnancy and after the child is born, testosterone levels can go down and estrogen levels can increase, he says, adding that lack of sleep is also a huge contributor to depression.

For Nissen, he believes it was a combination of sleep deprivation and having too high expectations for himself that caused his depression. Since his wife was breastfeeding, he did all of the diaper changing and was hardly getting any sleep.



"We really needed someone to help us," Nissen says. "I was so sleep-deprived I was literally hallucinating. I picked up the cat once and thought it was the baby."

More involvement is expected of dads now and that's why they need more support, Courtenay says.

"Most dads weren't raised in environments where they were taught how to be dads, and that leads to anxiety and depression," he said.

In his new book, *Rage Against Meshugenah*, Danny Evans of Orange County writes about the depression he experienced after his first child was born in 2001.

Evans, who also writes a blog about father issues called *Dad Gone Mad*, says he didn't know he was experiencing depression at first. He wasn't feeling a close bond with his new son and he felt very lonely.

One day he was on his way to a therapy session and, out of nowhere, started crying in his car. His therapist later explained to him that what he was experiencing was depression.

"We're trained as boys to think that depression is a feminine behavior," Evans says. "That stigma plays a huge role in keeping men from getting help."

With an 8-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter, he loves being a dad now and has learned to manage his depression with medication and therapy.

"It was a long, difficult journey," Evans says.

Impact on children

The study by *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* in 2008 showed that depressed fathers more negatively impacted their child's language development

Resources

- **Postpartum Depression for Dummies.** By Shoshana Bennett. For Dummies, 2007.
- **The Postpartum Husband: Practical Solutions for Living with Postpartum Depression.** By Karen Kleiman. Xlibris Corporation, 2001.
- **Rage Against Meshugenah.** By Danny Evans. NAL Trade, 2009.
- **saddaddy.com.** A Web site for depressed dads, with an online

forum, information about paternal postnatal depression and resources.

However, it does point out that there are well-documented risk factors from maternal depression including impairments in social development, externalizing behavior and emotional difficulties.

More than 4,000 families were surveyed in the study with children between 9-months to 2-years-old.

While it showed that both parents read less to their children when they were depressed, author James Paulson, assistant professor of pediatrics at Eastern Virginia Medical School, says children of these depressed fathers knew about 5 percent fewer words than the average child at age 2.

Paulson says they don't know for sure why these were the results. It's possible, he says, that fathers have more opportunity to disengage with a child since mothers are often the child caretaker in the family and spend more time with their kids.

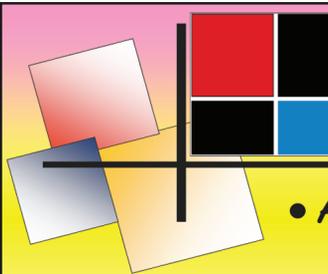
Most importantly, says Paulson, is that this study shows a father's depression can impact a child.

"There needs to be more attention paid to new families. Fathers need to be screened as well," he says. "This is a family problem."

Bennett says that in her experience, boys tend to suffer more than girls when their father is depressed. She says boys usually have behavioral issues and are typically hostile, angry and quiet.

Nissen says his son, now 16 months old, never appeared to be affected by his depression. "He loved me even when I wasn't loving him. Even at the worst of times he wanted me to pick him up."

Teresa Mills-Faraudo is a calendar editor for *Bay Area Parent* and mother of a 2-year-old son.



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