New Fathers, Mental Health and Social Media

Findings from a qualitative project with 15 new fathers

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About the Project

- This project analysed in-depth, qualitative material on new fathers' experiences of mental health difficulties after having a baby.
- In particular, we focused on fathers' use of online communications as part of their coping practices.
- Arising out of a project funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the University of Surrey that centred on in depth interviews with 15 fathers in the UK, the project explored the intense difficulties men can endure in recognizing the nature of perinatal struggles and communicating with others about them.
- This brief report presents findings from our analysis of the complex and varied engagements they have with digital communications as part of their experience.

Top Findings

- New fathers are often are unaware of the possibility of perinatal mental health challenges and also can experience significant difficulties with seeking support.
- We found that isolation and the lack of spaces to speak about their experiences is a significant problem.
- Fathers found it particularly difficult to express their difficulties to those close to them because of their investment into close relationships, and a need they felt to not let people down.
- Most fathers spoke of masculine pressures to be 'the rock' and their perceived self-conceptions as providers, not recipients, of support.
- Fathers sometimes turn to social media to seek information and express themselves. Such online resources can provide an invaluable source of information and interaction but do not always enable them to reach out or receive the support they need.
There is increasing evidence that men can experience mental health difficulties during the perinatal period (Mayers, 2018; Williams 2018).

Studies indicate 10% of new fathers experience depression (Giallo et al, 2013) and if variants of anxiety are included, the figure is likely to be higher (O’Brien et al 2017).

Such struggles are potentially harmful for men’s own wellbeing, their relationships and their families.

There are difficulties with societal understanding of paternal mental health difficulties and with the level of information and support available for fathers (Kowlessar et al, 2015).

Pressures on existing face-to-face support services for maternal perinatal wellbeing (Das, 2018) mean that practical circumstances for supporting male perinatal mental health are difficult, although a move towards screening some fathers has recently been announced by the NHS.

There is some evidence of positive well-being outcomes for fathers seeking and finding support in online spaces (Fletcher et al 2011; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013)
Our Findings: Difficulties Experienced by New Fathers

- Fathers reported both diagnosed and undiagnosed forms of depression, anxiety, trauma or more specific conditions (e.g. OCD).
- Such symptoms often had an impact on relationship, employment, friendships, bonding with their baby and their self-esteem.
- Fathers often were unable to understand what they were going through due to a lack of knowledge or information about fathers and mental health.

Our Findings: Contributing Circumstances

Fathers reported a range of circumstances that they felt had contributed to their difficulties. These included:

- Difficult pregnancies and/or traumatic births;
- Challenges relating to broken sleep and constant crying;
- Dramatic changes of identity and responsibilities;
- Baby's mother suffering depression, anxiety or physical difficulties;
- Lack of information on perinatal wellbeing for men and a lack of integration into supportive communities of other parents.
Our Findings on the Pressure of Masculine Expectations

"I'm not a steady rock.... Some things just don't have an outlet. I lay at night and thoughts that I don’t want .. come up, I ... trick my mind into making them go away...I want to portray a picture of managing...."

David

- Fathers consistently alluded to the metaphor of ‘the rock’ to convey the importance of impermeability, strength and steadfastness, as part of what they felt was expected of them, and what they had come to expect of themselves, as new fathers.
- The ‘rock’ metaphor connects closely to masculinity and links to broader difficulties men have opening up and seeking help, but manifesting in particular ways in relation to fatherhood.
- From friends and families to best-selling baby manuals and online advice sites, fathers-to-be often find themselves surrounded by language that frames new fatherhood as centering solely on the provision of unwavering support for their baby's mother - but rarely on their own needs for support.
- This risks conveying to fathers that they are peripheral to the experience of having and looking after a baby - and that the sole load of care is on the mother.
- But this also led some fathers to not perceive themselves as worthy recipients of support - something which seemingly made it more difficult for them to recognise themselves as fully involved, affected and vulnerable, or to identify and act on needs for help.
Pre-existing intimate relationships, including long-term and kinship ties did not always easily accommodate difficult conversations relating to mental health struggles.

Some fathers turned to networked media as a means to maintain or open up channels of communication with those closest to them.

Some used a single grand gesture such as a declaration on radio or social media, whilst others used small-scale family or personal 'group' messaging to open up.

In different ways, social media could help people communicate better inside existing social ties.

Many fathers went online to find the mutual understanding that only fellow sufferers can provide.

Such fellow sufferers, particularly in the context of private messaging conversations, offered the possibility of meaningful interactions and developing relationships free from the pressures of partners, family or close friends.

Disclosing struggles to unknown others online also often enabled others to open up - forging new connections.
Our Findings on Fathers hiding, masking and coding their difficulties online

- There is evidence that people sometimes mask, or hide or subtly code their messages online - something called "social steganography" (boyd & Marwick, 2010)
- We found fathers practising various strategies of hiding or concealing cries for help, often hoping that someone would interpret these codes and offer support - but this did not necessarily happen.
- They might re-tweet, 'like' or 'share' general articles on mental health hoping someone on social media would wonder why they had shared or liked it and get in touch.
- They might put up positive messages that subtly conveyed that they had struggled recently.
- These ‘affective’ (emotional) coding acts helped release some stress, but were not necessarily decoded.

"AFFECTIVE CODING"

"I’ve tried to kind of put myself out there a little bit on, even on a Facebook perspective, you know, make sure a story from … on mental health with new fathers and I shared it on Facebook… I think I selfishly thought I might get a bit of a response… not necessarily cry for help, but ..I kind of was hoping for someone..any of my friends to see that and go… hold on a minute, why is he sharing that?  If he’s sharing that, he must, maybe that’s how he feels, and that didn’t happen, which was quite disappointing, but you know that’s, that is what it is …"

Oliver
Our Findings on the 5 'modes' of social media engagement for fathers' perinatal mental health

**Disengagement**: disconnecting from social media ties or accounts as a means to cope.

**Seeking information and others**: engaging with online advice or the disclosures of other sufferers.

**Affective coding**: using social media to convey hidden messages about mental health struggles.

**Overt disclosure and support seeking**: communicating transparently online about difficulties and need for support.

**Supporting others, raising awareness**: helping other sufferers online, through individual communication or public awareness-raising.
Our Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Perinatal mental health policies should directly target new fathers, as well as new mothers, as potential sufferers of mental ill-health.
- Specifically, resources could be directed towards: a) informing fathers about the challenges fatherhood may involve, the possibility of mental health struggles and how to find support; b) putting systems in place that ensure fathers are routinely asked about their mental health and given opportunities to disclose difficulties.
- Existing material oriented to new fathers (for example, material shared in parenting classes and public-facing literature on and offline) should be reviewed to ensure potentially damaging masculine expectations are addressed and not reinforced.
- Emphasis on support for the child’s mother, for example, should form part of a much broader outline of what the experience of becoming a new father might involve, including challenges that may lead them to need support themselves.
- Interventions are needed to enable new fathers to connect with one another (or with mixed-gender parent groups that would welcome them). Children’s Centres and related 0-5 Early Years Support Services could be resourced to facilitate more fathers’ groups at suitable times of day to accommodate different patterns of work and caring, and to publicise them effectively.
- Digital media need to be recognised as offering specific possibilities for information and support but as part of a broader suite of measures, including dedicated offline support.
- Government, charities and the third sector should consider developing or expanding online resources that provide information and support for fathers, including those that connect fathers with one another.
- Existing online fathers’ resources and networks should be publicised more effectively. Studies also have indicated the potential of other digital technologies, including those based on provision of SMS-based information and support to new fathers and such programmes are worthy of consideration (Fletcher et al 2011). Caution should be exercised, however, as our study shows that digital resources and spaces do not always enable people to find the support they need.
Other Publications from this Project

Academic Publications


Other Writing

- Das, R. & Hodkinson, P. (2019). Evidence to the Women's and Equalities Select Committee on the Mental Health of Men and Boys.
Selected Further Reading


Ranjana Das
R.Das@Surrey.ac.uk;
@DrRanjanaDas

Paul Hodkinson
P.Hodkinson@surrey.ac.uk;
@Paul_Hodkinson

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