



Brief Report: Male Perinatal Mental Health – “I’ve never heard of it, until you talked about it.”

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Date: 30th August 2022

Summary

- Men report increased stress and anxiety as they became fathers particularly during their partner’s pregnancy, and birth.
- Men report lack of awareness of male perinatal mental health.
- Some men reported a lack of willingness to seek out mental health support even if they did struggle due to perceived ‘weakness’.
- Those who would access mental health support had reported previous positive experiences accessing mental health support.
- For those who did wish to access mental health support there was little understanding of what this support would be or where they could access this.

Issue

The psychological impact of becoming a father and male perinatal mental health has received limited attention compared mothers’ perinatal mental health. However, approximately 10% of fathers will experience issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress during the first five years of becoming a father. The transition to becoming a parent is a huge change that brings with it multiple psychological stressors.

We must identify how men experience the transition into fatherhood and how this impacts their mental health. We must also understand their awareness of perinatal male mental health and their experiences of support during their partners’ pregnancy and birth.

Background

The risk of postpartum depression in mothers is well known and researched. In comparison, relatively little is understood about the mechanisms underpinning poor mental health in men as they transition to fatherhood. (1, 2). Becoming a father is a significant change that brings with it multiple psychological stressors which may disproportionately impact some men more than others (1, 3 & 4). Fathers are therefore a vulnerable group that warrant further investment in terms of both researching the risk factors for poor mental health as well as improving accessibility to resources and father specific mental health assessment and intervention. This qualitative, exploratory study aimed to understand the question: what are fathers' experiences of becoming a parent and how can the mental health support for fathers be improved?

Emerging evidence

Nine participants were recruited through convenience sampling during 2022, and semi-structured interviews were carried out online. Please see Table 1 for the Participant Demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Age	Ethnicity	Region	Age of Child or Children	Relationship Status	Employment Status
PID001	35	Other	Glasgow	1 year 7 months	Married	Part time
PID002	25	White (British)	Bedfordshire	5 months	Other	Full time
PID003	32	White (British)	Wales	4 years, 10 months	Married	Self-employed
PID004	49	White (British)	Shropshire	2 years	Domestic Partnership or Civil Union	Self-employed
PID006	33	White (British)	Shropshire	1 year 6.5 months	Married	Full time
PID007	31	White (British)	Liverpool	1 year 7 months	Married	Part time
PID008	37	White (British)	Edinburgh	3 years 8 months	Married	Full time
PID010	39	White (British)	Derbyshire	5 years 5 months, 2 years 2 months	Married	Full time
PID011	43	White (British)	Powys	5 years 6 months, 3 years 9 months	Married	Full time

Note. Where participants have more than one child, their ages are separated by a comma.

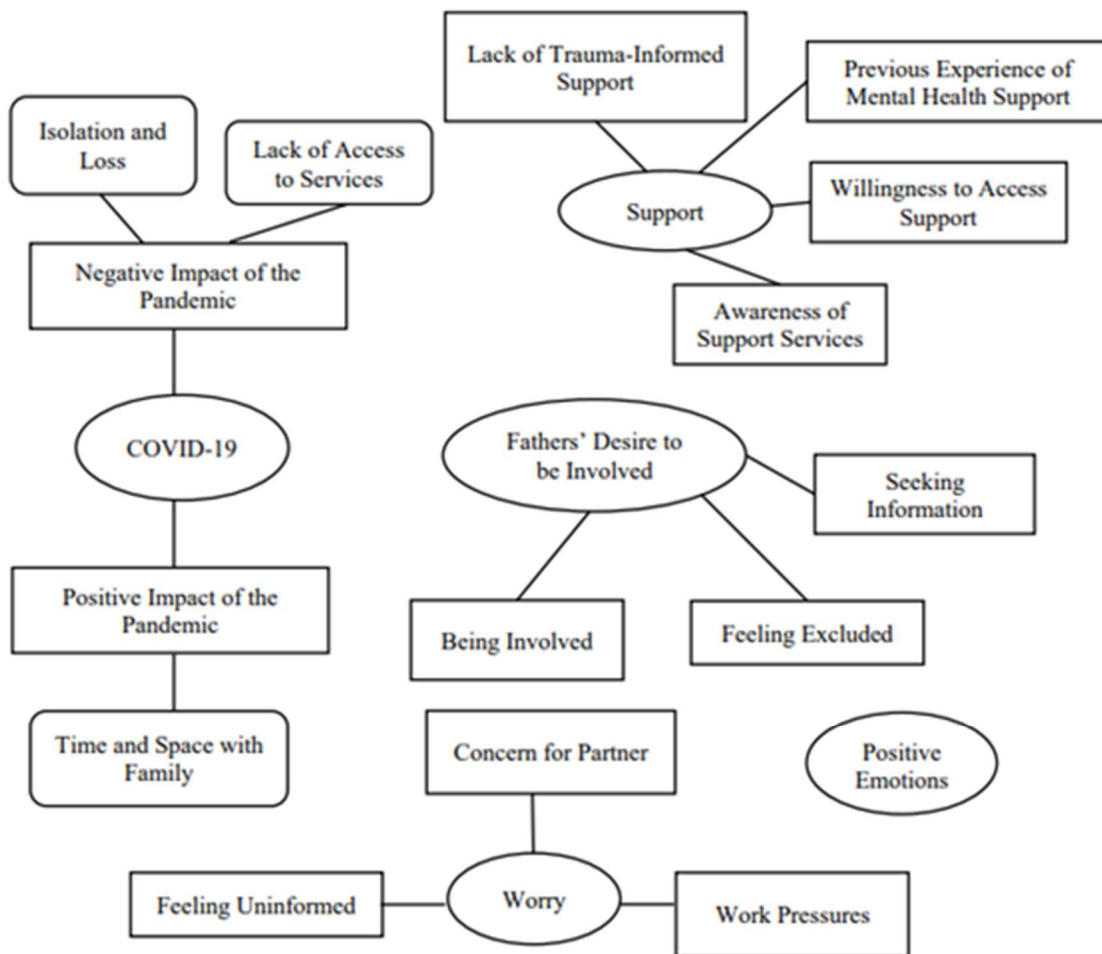
PID005 and PID009 were uncontactable so interviews were not able to be carried out.

Results 1 – Themes

Five main themes were identified after thematic analysis was undertaken: *Worry, Positive Emotions, COVID-19, Fathers’ Desire to be Involved and Support* (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Final Thematic Map Showing Five Main Themes



Results 2 – Key Themes and Quotes

Findings indicated that fathers experienced many psychological stressors including worry around partner, work and feeling uninformed.

“the birth, it just kind of made me feel powerless. I couldn't do anything.” [PID010]

“[Partner] ended up on the maternity ward for five days and [child] ended up in the special care baby unit for five days. So I basically spent half of my two weeks off because, you know, paternity leave is so great in this country... I spent half the time in and out of hospital.” [PID006]

“So yeah, and again, on the information front, [that] was actually some feedback we gave to the hospital. I don't feel that, especially in the special care unit, there was any real support for dads. I felt like [we] were just expected to get on with it. But you weren't really even told what you were meant to be getting on with, so any direction you get would be from your other half.” [PID006]

The men reported that support was needed although some men did mention a reluctance to seek help out like the participant below outlines -

“if you say you've got mental health concerns then your're admitting that there's a weakness and yeah, I think I would struggle to ask for help.” [PID003]

Those who reported that they would seek help were those men who had had a positive experience accessing mental health before –

“My first port of call has usually been my GP, who's very understanding. Yeah, I've always just gone through my GP and gone that way, you know, tried various things, different types of therapy and different types of antidepressant.” [PID007]

Some men however weren't even aware of what support was available and demonstrated a lack of understanding what support would look like as the participant below outlines

“well, I don't want to be on antidepressants, you know, I don't [want to] end up, you know, on drugs or whatever it might be [...] I'd rather just try to do something that makes me feel a bit happy. You know, play football or whatever [that] might be,” [PiD 010]

Worryingly some men mentioned a complete disregard for male mental health during the pregnancy and birth with some reporting they hadn't heard of perinatal male mental health,

“You know perinatal mental health in fathers is maybe not a topic that is... Well, I've never heard it, until you talked about it.” [PID008]

Recommendations

1. Men who are becoming fathers and experiencing fatherhood are a vulnerable group. They are experiencing psychological stresses that may increase poor mental health outcomes.



2. There is a need to acknowledge the importance of men's perinatal mental health and there is a need to begin screening for this at the same time as women's perinatal mental health.
3. Targeted resources and tailored support services are needed to help men transition to fatherhood reducing feelings of helplessness, stress and anxiety.
4. It is crucial that higher levels of awareness of male perinatal mental health in men and health staff who support couples as they become parents.

Academic expertise

Dr Karri Gillespie-Smith (Senior Lecturer based in Clinical Psychology, University of Edinburgh), an expert in developmental psychology.

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