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## **Daddy's Got the Blues**

Postpartum depression isn't just the plight of new moms.

By Lisa Bendall

To any onlooker, Dwayne James had it made: A lovely new bride, a beautiful daughter from a previous marriage and adorable twin baby boys. But that wasn't how the Peterborough, Ont., dad felt. "I was anxious and sad," James recalls. "I had a complete lack of self-confidence. I was listless and unmotivated most of the time."

Health-care providers keep an eye on a woman's physical and mental well-being in the months before and after she welcomes a baby, but women aren't the only ones who go through a massive life change. Many of the worries and stressors that can plague a new mom (often a more critical factor than hormones in the development of postpartum depression) can also have an effect on a new dad. And many studies, which were reviewed in *Psychiatry* in 2007, have shown that, to a degree, fathers are at greater-than-normal risk of mood disorders during the perinatal period.

James's feelings started before the boys were born. He was laid off from his full-time job one day before his wife, Sarah, announced her surprise pregnancy. "Suddenly, I felt worthless, rejected, like I didn't have anything to offer that anybody wanted," he says. He fretted about two new mouths to feed. A few months before the twins were born, James found a part-time job, but his inability to make decisions affected his performance.

The heavy cloud persisted after the birth of his sons, and was worsened by fatigue from their night wakings. "I was a lot more short-tempered, always getting angry at things that didn't bother me before," he says. That's when he recalled a bout of depression after his first marriage failed, and realized his symptoms were similar.

James's story has a happy ending. Once he knew he was depressed, he discovered a range of self-help tools, like creating art and connecting with others online, and worked his way to a more positive place. Even though James gained weight and had mood swings through both of his wives' pregnancies, he didn't make the link to postpartum depression (PDD). At first, James says, he "didn't know that this was something men got." The truth is, perinatal mood disorder – a broader term than PPD – is more common than many dads would suspect.

### **Why do men get PPD?**

"People don't make the connection between mood disorder, pregnancy and postpartum, and men, and that's unfortunate. They tend to focus on women," says Tascheleia Marangoni of Postpartum Depression Awareness Project Ltd., a non-profit organization with chapters across western Canada. Exact numbers aren't known, but it's estimated that 10 to 15 percent or more of men experience depression or anxiety during their partner's pregnancy or soon after their baby's birth.

Financial stress, like the kind James felt, is a giant risk factor. A dad is also more likely to be depressed if he's had an episode of depression in the past, or if his partner is going

through PPD, particularly if he can't figure out how to help her. Sleep deprivation makes it harder to cope and so does a lack of support or isolation from family.

Marangoni also blames societal expectations: We count on dads to take an equal role in caring for baby, yet they may feel ill equipped or overwhelmed. "A lot of men see that no matter what they do, the baby wants mom. It undermines what confidence they have," she says.

### **Suffering in silence**

Dad's depression can go unnoticed because it often looks different from his partner's. "Women are emotional and tend to demonstrate classic symptoms like crying," says Nicole Letourneau, who is the Norlien/Alberta Children's Hospital foundational research chair in Infant-Parent Mental Health at the University of Calgary. "Dads withdraw from social situations. They get very busy at work. They're more likely to display feelings of irritability and indecisiveness, frustration, anger and resentment."

In her research on fathers affected by postpartum depression, Letourneau found that new dads are less likely than moms to ask for help. "These men are reinforced in their beliefs that they should be fine, because otherwise we would be asking them how they're doing," she explains.

James admits he hid his feelings at first to protect his exhausted wife. For her part, Sarah only noticed that her husband was quiet and less confident. She'd heard of PDD in men, but didn't know what symptoms to watch for, and had no clue her husband might be suffering from it. "Any information that was made available was geared towards me, to help me if I was going through it," she says. "It would have been nice to have been more informed. We had discussions about how he was feeling, and he just covered it all up."

When James finally revealed his true feelings to Sarah months after the boys were born, he quickly realized they could help each other. "We shared coping mechanisms and strategies," he says. "She could tell me about people she talked to, and I could talk to her about things I read."

### **The road to recovery**

It's normal to feel emotional around the birth of a baby, but if these feelings last more than a month and are intense enough to interfere with day-to-day activities, that's a sign that help is needed.

But where can men turn? Marangoni started her organization because she found it a challenge, as a mom, to find help for her own PPD. She says it's even tougher for dads. Letourneau agrees. "The men in our studies didn't feel like there were opportunities to seek help. It contributes to men using other ways to cope, like alcohol – and 'work-a-hol.'"

While there are some online support groups and resources for men who have perinatal mood disorder. James discovered that websites for parents of twins, although not specifically about depression, helped him realize he wasn't alone with certain parenting challenges. Social media was another outlet where he could share laughs about his high-spirited babies. Even pursuing a hobby – watercolour painting – settled him. "That really helped me work through a lot of my feelings," he says.

A family doctor or employee assistance program can point new fathers towards a counsellor. Men are less likely than women to participate in face-to-face support groups, but phone counselling is a good option. In fact, talk therapy is thought to work just as well as antidepressants. The same goes for peer mentoring – dads who have recovered from postpartum depression can demonstrate that it gets better. “I think it’s as simple as the hope that is given to parents when they’re suffering. That’s something to hold onto,” Letourneau says.

Today, James has embraced his role as an artist and stay-at-home dad. “I realize I’m happier now with a fraction of the money coming in,” he says. “I’ve been granted a golden opportunity to be involved in the formative years of my boys, and also lead a creatively driven life. This is what lights me up.”