

MORE FOR DADS

by

Venetia Moore

This article is about how you, the dad, could be perceiving this whole new experience of fatherhood. I will be looking at some of the possible thoughts and feelings you could be having, and giving you some ideas and suggestions to consider putting into action.

'I DIDN'T EXPECT TO FEEL THIS WAY'

In the early days, mum and baby become extremely preoccupied with getting acquainted. Feeling the dynamics of your relationship change, you now may not be sure where you fit in. You may be concerned that your partner doesn't love you as much any more. You may feel pressure to be the 'strong man', when the truth is that you haven't slept in days and feel physically and mentally exhausted and possibly a little lost.

However, it's also possible that you could be misinterpreting how your partner is really feeling about you and also her own parenting role at this time; she could be finding it just as hard to adjust to the radical change as you are!

Whatever the case, it's likely that the focus of attention is naturally more centred on mum and baby, and you may be feeling that your needs and feelings are being overlooked. Perhaps you're feeling the weight of the financial and emotional responsibilities of parenthood, and even feeling a little overwhelmed by it.

Maybe it didn't seem that real until the moment actually arrived, and arrive it did in a rather dramatic and profound fashion! You've seen this miracle unfolding in front of your eyes, and now you're trying to be actively supportive while actually feeling quite daunted and maybe a little superfluous. It's not uncommon for men to find it difficult to adjust to the arrival of a baby and the radical changes this brings. The difficulties are increased if you're misinterpreting how your partner is really feeling about you at this time when she, like you, is trying to adjust to the radical changes that she is experiencing.

DO YOU FEEL...

- That you're not bonding with your baby as well as your partner seems to be?
- Ignored most of the time, superfluous, and unsure how you could be more involved?
- Angry about the amount of time that your partner is spending with the baby and not with you?

- Frustrated because you're not able to do all the things you used to do before you had the baby?
- Generally unsure about what you're doing as a parent most of the time?

It's good to be honest with yourself and acknowledge your feelings, even if you 're not impressed with them! You don't have to feel ashamed about these feelings; they are not uncommon. But, even though you wouldn't wish them to, they could negatively affect your behaviour towards your baby and your partner, so it's a good idea to address them as soon as you can. By realising that you're not alone in having those thoughts, acknowledging and accepting your feelings, and not burdening yourself with feelings of shame and guilt, a lot of negative pressure could start to lift.

Try to be as open as you can and share your thoughts and feelings clearly and honestly with your partner, not in a shaming or blaming way, but just to air your concerns. If you're reluctant to do that, perhaps not wishing to burden her, or for some other reason, then try writing them down. This gives you a way to express them and also to look at them more clearly and objectively. Then find a trusted friend, family member, counsellor or doctor to talk them over with. It's important that your feelings are acknowledged and heard in some way, and that you find positive ways to move forward.

Check out some websites and blogging sites for dads. You'll find out just how many other dads are feelings just the same as you and get some helpful suggestions.

BONDING

Bonding often presents a challenge. It's fair to say that many dads find it difficult to bond with their newborn baby straight away. It's normal to experience a mixture of emotions. Trying to bond with your baby while he or she is suffering from something like baby colic or some other infantile problem, wouldn't be easy! You need lots of patience – and, don't forget, this difficult period will not last forever!

Your baby needs your love and support in whatever way you can offer it. Research shows that men can be as nurturing as women, and good parenting improves with practice. However, men and women tend to favour different ways of interacting with their baby. Men naturally tend to enjoy being more physical and energetic, playing noisy rough and tumble games, while women naturally tend to deal more with the baby's emotional and nurturing needs. However, there's no reason why both parents can't enjoy both of these important roles.

If you're finding it hard to relate to what may seem to be rather a fragile, noisy little being, you might like to try some of these bonding ideas.

- GENTLE HUGS AND CUDDLES

Simple but wonderful, just hugging and cuddling your baby will help to reassure both of you that you matter to each other. It's a natural way to give and receive affection. It also encourages the release in both of you of the 'feel-good' hormone oxytocin, which can help with the bonding process.

- **TIME TOGETHER**

Bath your baby, sit with your baby for a while, or try some baby massage. Baby massage will help to bring you closer together in a relaxed and loving way; you'd be amazed at how wonderful you could feel afterwards.

- **PLAYTIME**

Have some fun together, just enjoying each other's company. Talk to your baby – they will love to hear your voice. Try some baby yoga exercises, easy movements that can be combined with swings and lifts. This time together can greatly help you to bond further while you're having some fun.

- **JUMP IN**

Do your best to get involved in your little baby's care as much as possible; the more experience you gain, the more easily you'll be able to relax into your parenting role. It won't be long before your baby's unconditional love warms your heart and you begin to feel more confident.

THE DADDY BLUES

Some research suggests that around 10% of men experience a period of post-natal blues. Odd as it may sound, you could feel simultaneously empowered and disempowered: empowered because you have this new love, and disempowered because you're feeling vulnerable about your being responsible for this new being.

Canadian researcher Anne Storey has found that new fathers' testosterone levels drop radically, by up to one third, after childbirth. Testosterone affects energy and mood, so this can result in your feeling a little down. These lowered hormone levels, however, can also be beneficial, increasing your tolerance and helping you to feel calmer, which all helps with the bonding process.

Other stresses and anxieties could also contribute to the dampening of your feelings. Perhaps you're feeling low because of the number of changes you're having to make to your lifestyle, as well as feeling the weight of the responsibility of being a provider and supporter. You're not alone with these thoughts; it's natural to have them. You can't really appreciate what it's like to have a baby to care for until it happens, and there is bound to be a transition time where all sorts of concerns arise. It's important to remember that they will resolve in

Here are some signs that might indicate you have a touch of the blues:

- Lethargy
- Negative thoughts

- Mood swings
- Feelings of anxiety and despair
- Increased irritability and anger
- Thoughts of disillusionment
- Feeling stressed a lot of the time

These signs can be experienced by both sexes, but the reasons for having them could be different.

Here are some suggestions to help yourself through the blues:

- **BE HONEST** with yourself and acknowledge that you are feeling low. Take it seriously, realising that it's OK to be experiencing these thoughts and feelings, and then take some positive steps to help yourself through them. When you become more positive about your situation you will be indirectly helping those around you too. Seek a friendly or professional ear to share your thoughts and feeling with. This proactive move could considerably help to lighten your worries and concerns.
- **TALK THINGS OVER WITH YOUR PARTNER.** Be real with your partner; it's more than likely that she is also feeling some anxieties and concerns about parenting, and will be relieved to be able to talk things over positively with you. A good partnership allows you both to be honest and real with each other in expressing how you each view the problem or situation: no shame or blame – just good communication. While it's possible you're experiencing things similarly, it's also possible that you could have different perspectives. Both points of view need to be respected and acknowledged as being different but equally important. By putting your minds together the two of you can work together to bring about improvements a lot faster.
- **BE OPEN** to sharing your thoughts with a trusted friend, family member, GP or health professional. It can be very helpful to talk with someone who is not so closely involved and is able to see things from a different perspective. Bottling up feelings and concerns can lead to prolonged blues and even possibly clinical depression. Airing your concerns and dealing with the root causes of being down can enable you to see things differently, and help you to shift your mood.
- **ACCEPT HELP.** Don't let pride prevent you from accepting help from someone you trust. Catch up on sleep, do nothing, or go and have some fun!
- **EXERCISE.** Regular exercise helps to boost your feel-good hormones, balance your mood and help you to de-stress. There are many ways to exercise: walking, running, swimming, squash, Tai Chi, Yoga, gym workouts. Simply finding time to have a walk each day would help to disperse pent up negative energy.

- **GET SOME TIME OUT.** Discuss with your partner some ways in which you can take it in turns to have individual time out to refresh and recharge. Find ways for the two of you to take some valuable time out together too. Sometimes just talking about it and making plans to do something in the future will lift the spirits.
- **BREATHE DEEPLY.** When we are under stress we tend to breathe in a shallow way, and this can become a habit. Consciously taking a couple of deep breaths can really help to refresh the mind, energize the body and calm the nervous system. It bodes well for clear thinking too.
- **HANG OUT WITH YOUR BABY.** The more you can muck in and spend time with your baby, the better you'll bond and will begin to experience the good feelings this brings. Walk, talk, bath, play, and sit and lie together; change their nappies; feed them, tell them your awful jokes, share your latest superhero impressions, confide your deepest dreams and aspirations – anything! They'll just love to be with you.
- **BE AWARE** that sitting at a computer for long periods could make your feelings worse. It has been reported that hours in front of a screen can cause an energetic build-up in the body and this in turn can create feelings of anger and frustration. However, this can easily be rectified by standing up every half hour and moving the body in some way to restore the natural energy flow. Dehydration caused by long computer hours can also contribute to feelings of unease and stress, so make sure you drink plenty of water.

If you find your low moods don't lift after a natural period of adjustment, and feel increasing worse with time, I suggest you talk to a trusted friend, family member, GP or a counsellor. Talking things over could help you to alleviate some of your stress, help you to see another perspective and it could help to ease you out of a potential negative rut. There are many treatments and natural remedies available that can boost good health and well-being; it's worth being proactive and finding out about them.

Parenting is a life changing experience; one most of us are not really prepared for. It throws us out of our predictable, familiar comfort zone and spins our compass wildly! It also provides us with a fantastic opportunity to blast out our old ways and get acquainted with some amazing new experiences. The more we give, the more we receive, babies hold the gift of opening us up to great love.

WORD COUNT: APPROX 1,600 WORDS

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ABOUT VENETIA MOORE

A COMPLEMENTARY HEALTH & WELL-BEING PRACTITIONER

Venetia lives in the South West of England where she has worked as a complementary health and well-being practitioner and teacher for over 23 years. She has been part of a complementary health centre in Minehead, set up by a group of very forward thinking doctors in 1995. Her clinics offer a variety of therapeutic treatments and she provides a full range of classes for adults, parents and babies.

THE BABY COLIC COACH AND AUTHOR OF *SURVIVING BABY COLIC*

As a parent of two children who suffered with colic, she has gathered both personal and professional experience and understanding of the complex challenges parents face at this time. Her new book, *Surviving Baby Colic* is a practical, holistic guide providing support, information, illustrations, natural care ideas and suggestions on how to help your baby and how to look after yourself well during this demanding time.

She also offers a new online service as The Baby Colic Coach, to help parents to identify colic and to give them support and ways to naturally help their babies at this challenging time.

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