

# THE DADDY BLUES

## Fathers and Depression

by Venetia Moore

Working over the last 24 years as a complementary health and well-being practitioner and in more recent years as a baby colic coach, I've had the opportunity to meet many new mums who have found strength and comfort from sharing their thoughts and feelings about the ups and downs of parenthood. I've also witnessed a marked increase of concerned dads coming through the treatment room door wishing to be part of their baby's nurturing health care.

The 21st century brings a welcome increase of 'hands-on dads' in our society, evidently happy to enter what were once considered primarily female roles and social areas. It's now normal to see dads pushing buggies, chatting in the playground with other fathers, and turning up with confidence and ease to playgroups and baby classes. Why shouldn't dads be part of their children's social and well-being care? Refreshingly, couples today are freer from restrictive social conditioning and are more able to mix and match parental roles to do what's best for them and their children.

Feeling it was time to place the focus on fathers, I interviewed a number of dads, eager to hear their thoughts and feelings about their experiences of fatherhood and to find out what did or didn't work for them. This article aims to discuss some of those real experiences and challenges, and to explore some positive ways forward.

### THE BLUES

We've all heard of post-natal depression and the baby blues with reference to mothers. Is there such thing for fathers? According to research, up to 10% of new fathers could experience a degree of baby blues or even clinical depression. While most of the focus has been on the mums, little consideration has been given to you, the dads, who could be also having similar experiences. Low thoughts and feelings can be tiring and disempowering, and can be an obstacle to your being able to relax and enjoy parenthood.

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.

## SOME POSSIBLE CAUSES

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 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 as they can increase your tolerance and help you to feel calmer, which helps with the bonding process.

Other stresses and anxieties could also contribute to the dampening of your feelings. Dads have said that they were feeling low because of the number of changes they had to make to their lifestyle, that they were not fully prepared for. Some were feeling that their freedom had been restricted, so they were no longer able to do what they wanted when they wanted. Others have talked about how mentally unprepared they were for the weight of responsibility they suddenly felt as the provider and supporter. One father said: 'I just didn't think it would be so hard, and I didn't think I would get so utterly exhausted'.

Sleep deprivation is something that doctors are taking seriously and diagnosing more often. It may be due to the fact that your child is suffering with colic and is needing a lot of care and attention day and night. Or may be your baby is dealing with some other infantile problem that has prevented them from relaxing properly and sleeping well. Sometimes there is no problem at all, it's just that your baby is needing time to adjust to life and establish a working routine.

Dealing with a heavy work load or difficult working hours, such as night shifts, combined with the work load of having a new baby, could be depleting your energy reserves. When someone gets mentally and physically exhausted, emotions can become heightened and negative thoughts can increase along with the feelings of intense irritability leading to your getting angry over the smallest of things. One dad said that he felt life was a blur, day merging into night and night into day. "I've never felt so exhausted in all my life," he told me.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

First of all it's important to realise that you are not alone with these thoughts; it's natural to have them. You can't really appreciate what it's like having 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 time, and things will change. Another dad wanted me to pass on his best advice to other fathers going through a rough patch: "Don't forget that it won't last forever. You will get through it."

So how can you get through the rough patches quicker and with less stress and anxiety? Here are some suggestions:

- **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.
- **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 shift your mood.
- **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.
- **ACCEPT HELP.** Don't let pride prevent you from accepting help from someone. If you trust. Catch up on sleep, do nothing, or go and have some fun!
- **EXERCISE.** Whether it's going for a walk, or doing something more vigorous like running, swimming or squash, exercise can help to release a negative build-up of stress and tension in body, while also promoting the body's natural endorphins which could improve your mood and well-being.
- **BE AWARE OF THE DEPRESSIVE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL.** You may feel it helps to get some relief from your mood by having a drink or two, but be aware that alcohol is considered a depressant and in the long run is not going to help.
- **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.

Even though we might want the job of parenting to be black or white, it's not; there are many shades of grey and experiencing them helps us to find out what we are really made of. Once you've moved through your early challenges and are feeling refreshed once again, the sleepless nights and chaotic, nappy-filled days a distant memory, why not become aware of how you have changed? Perhaps you'll find that those times showed you levels of patience and resilience you just didn't know you had. Find time to congratulate yourself on being a real '21st century hands-on dad'.

## **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. She also runs a variety of classes for parents, babies, and adults.

### **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 an online service to help parents to identify colic and to give them ways to help and support themselves and their babies at this time.

**[www.thebabycoliccoach.co.uk](http://www.thebabycoliccoach.co.uk)**

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WORD COUNT APPROX 1500 words

POSSIBLE PULLOUTS:

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