

Scary Fatherhood: Understanding and Exploring the Postnatal Struggles in Men of Our Indian Society

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Abstract

The Postpartum Period or often known as the Postnatal period begins after the childbirth and lasts till the recovery of the mother that takes place during that phase. While the postpartum period is a time of immense joy and wonder simultaneously it can also bring about challenges and complexities in life. Parental mental health particularly postpartum depression can disrupt the bonding and attachment impacting a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. The postpartum period is predominantly viewed through the lens of women's perspective that makes the men's struggles and hardships go unnoticed. However men can also face significant emotional, social and psychological challenges during that period.

Olivia Spencer's "*Sad Dad: An Exploration of Postnatal Depression in Fathers*" sheds light on the many aspects of postnatal depression in fathers. It includes a review of recent studies and research in this particular area, investigating the reason behind male postnatal depression and how it affects the mental and social relationships. Also Mark Williams "*Daddy Blues: Postnatal Depression and Fatherhood*" is a touching story from a rarely explored perspective that tells a tale of a man learning to deal with a problem he never knew he would ever encounter. Through an in depth analysis of these seminal works, it reflects the need for a greater awareness, support system and a cultural shift that addresses the postpartum struggles faced by the men especially in a society like India.

Keywords: Postnatal, mental health, depression, paternal struggle, emotional, social, psychological, child, mother, pain, sufferings.

Introduction

The postpartum phase, according to the World Health Organisation, starts as soon as the baby is born and lasts for at least six weeks, but it can also be months or even years. Delays in starting breastfeeding, unsanitary cord care techniques, prenatal feedings, sociocultural beliefs, and limitations are some of the detrimental postpartum behaviours that have been documented. These practices can result in poor mental and physical health for both the mother and the child. Only recently has there been progress in raising awareness around paternal mental health. The father's mental state may have an impact on the mother, the child, the family, and the community. It is difficult to identify the detrimental paternal prenatal mental effects because there are no official, widely accepted diagnostic guidelines. ("Postpartum Depression in Fathers: A Systematic Review," 2024, #)

Being a father for the first time is one of the most dramatic and life-changing events that many men go through, and it can be uncertain. Happiness can result from these changes when things are going well. Alternatively, the experience of becoming a parent might leave one feeling psychologically and physically worn out. When a perinatal traumatic incident occurs, fathers are typically left out of the circle. Around them, experts assist mothers and infants in overcoming these challenges. The father is forced to accept a condition while simultaneously trying to act as a spectator, witness, and protector. This makes one more susceptible to emotional and mental health issues.

"It tends to be someone else, not the father himself who identifies the depression in a new dad,"

This paper provides an in depth analysis of the postnatal struggles in men of our society. It also discusses the greater negative impact it has on the newborn, the family and one's ownself. Olivia Spencer's and Mark Williams' works on this field acts as a guiding light, providing enough knowledge and experience about this unnoticed struggle of new fathers.

1.1. Fathers as the Silent Sufferers

In Indian society, it is generally believed that fatherhood comes with a sense of unawareness and confusion as they embark on the journey of parenthood. Usually men are not seen actively participating in taking the responsibility of childcare after the baby is born. As we know it is a preconceived belief that mothers are the primary caregivers which leaves the men less acknowledged with the practicality and charm of various tasks such as feeding, changing diapers or even just calming the baby. This lack of guidance, awareness and experience can make fathers feel under confident, unprepared and anxious resulting in self doubt. The "*New Fathers, Mental Health and Digital Communication*, Paul Hodkinson and Ranjana Das" highlights the journey of new fathers and their struggles with mental and emotional and psychological issues.

When a baby is born it also brings significant changes for fathers such as:

Conflict with partner - while embracing their new roles as parents there is a drastic shift in the nature of the relationship that the husbands share with their partners. During the postpartum period the shift in the attention and love of the mother towards the child can make the husband feel neglected. Fathers feel a certain emotional distance from the partner as they become abruptly unavailable for their husbands. This garners the seed of misunderstanding between them. Also men feel unsure about how to communicate with their partner during this period, for which rebuilding their connection feels like a burden to them. The lack of proper conversation about the journey into parenthood can lead to frustration between partners.

Balancing work with parenthood- Men return to work early as compared to women, as in India paternal leaves are still not considered a necessity. This arouses conflict between the professional duties and the desire to stay at home and spend more time with the newborn. As viewed by our stereotyped Indian society, which perceives men as the sole breadwinners to the family, this can potentially build a pressure to balance work and parenthood. This scenario worsens when the new fathers are engulfed with financial stress.

Against the stereotype - Our Indian society projects a social image and reputation that men are individuals who can handle challenges of parenthood without complaining and compromising

their masculine personality. It promotes the idea of men being "strong" and "stoic". But it is also observed that they too go through certain emotional conflicts during this period, where our society prepares them and discourages them from showing their vulnerability of emotions. The cultural expectation can prevent men from expressing their vulnerability or asking for help during the postpartum period. This suppression can adversely affect their way of parenting, obstruct their bonding with the child and even negatively impact the ability to communicate openly with their partner.

Unawareness - The childbirth takes a physical and emotional toll on the mother. Fathers not being fully aware of this can underestimate the need for physical presence and emotional support towards the mother. Lack of involvement and parental awareness leave men unprepared and confused about raising a child. Families often the extended family members like aunts and grandparents have strong opinions about how to raise a child. But amidst all this the father is found standing confused about the right way of raising the child. The final chapters cited in "*Sad Dad: An Exploration of Postnatal Depression in Fathers*" provides a real life scenario by the author Olivia Spencer, that gives an insight into various elements related to fathers and their crucial role in parenting. (Spencer, 2014, #)

Mental health - The lack of societal awareness about postnatal depression brings fathers in distress, anxiety, and frustration which often ends up in isolation or loneliness. They start searching for other sources of contentment and peace. Less attention to the recognition of the mental and emotional challenges that the fathers experience can even worsen the scenario. With the birth of a child, the financial burden on the father increases as there are several additional costs that are associated with childcare, medical care and other responsibilities like their schooling and providing a better life. In Indian culture, men usually feel the immense pressure to fulfill the demands and needs of the family. In the apprehension of not being able to meet these expectations they feel inferior and anxious.

1.2.1. The Stereotyped Society

Postpartum depression symptoms also tend to differ in men and women. Fathers who experience it are more prone to isolate themselves, participate in activities, and attempt to distract themselves by, for example, working longer hours or using their phones more. Alcohol use, indecision, irritability, and self-criticism are all linked to them. According to some research, men's hormones change when a baby is born, and have a significant impact on postpartum depression in general. However, in the case of males, the psychological and social factors are also quite important. On the other hand, when they are depressed, children often show their feelings in a different way than the mother does. It has been noted that they are not very expressive when it comes to crying, but they frequently share their emotions with their partner by acting irritably or aggressively. Because of this, the true cause of their sadness could be misunderstood, which is made worse by the father's unwillingness to get treatment. Mark Williams writes in his book "*Daddy Blues: Postnatal Depression and Fatherhood*" that Williams, a Welshman, worked for himself after the birth of his child in 2004. Shortly after two hours of the birth, he was supposed to return to work. The birth of his wife was traumatic in the first place. "*I had a panic attack in the labour ward, and then the doctor said my wife was going to the theatre for an unexpected C-section,*" he adds. To one sold him on the situation while she was there. He believed that his wife and child would perish. In most of the scenarios the male partner is restricted from knowing what actually goes through the process of delivery, how painful it is and what changes a mother goes through to give birth to a child. This makes them feel neglected and unaware. (Williams, 2018, #)

There are several cases that show the need for support for their mental health among the men in the postpartum period. As stated in the book "*Daddy Blues: Postnatal Depression and Fatherhood*" by Mark Williams who could not avail much support around his and his wife's mental health. Provided the given society he also feared that he could not talk to anyone about Michelle's illness (such is the stigma). In that scenario, without much support, Mark's own mental health suffered too. (Williams, 2025)

Our society has a stereotyped thinking about everything that has any relation to mental health. At the same time seeking help for postnatal depression in men is considered a huge drastic step. Postnatal depression

in men widely arises because of the traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Men are often believed to be strong, self-reliant, rigid, and emotionally stoic, who are expected to keep calm and composed even while going through financial or mental turmoil. This makes it difficult for them to acknowledge mental health struggles. There's a stigmatic idea prevailing that men showing vulnerability, especially regarding the emotions tied to fatherhood, is a sign of weakness.

Moreover, from the ancient ages, postnatal depression has always been associated primarily with women due to the physical and hormonal changes that follow childbirth, which results in the lack of awareness and understanding that men can also experience similar emotional challenges during this time. As a consequence, many men may feel distanced, embarrassed, or even guilty for struggling with depression, scared that they are failing as fathers or partners. When fathers were questioned about their part in the journey of fatherhood, they often clarified and quoted in their conversation that it was a mixture of feelings about their confused state and inner conflicts.

Men are often seen to avoid medical care and treatment more frequently than women do. There are studies from other nations besides India. For instance, in Canada, researchers have discovered that approximately 10% of men will not seek medical attention. But it's also mostly because of sentiments of shame or embarrassment or being criticised for being a man, particularly a "father." Due to the stigmatisation and feminisation of mental health, males are really reluctant to seek help. Still, there are a lot of misconceptions and preconceived notions about mental illness that lead people to believe that having mental health problems or discussing them is a sign of weakness.

This stigma can prevent men from seeking the help, contributing to prolonged suffering and a negative impact on family dynamics. Encouraging open discussions, redefining societal expectations and parental roles, and normalizing mental health care for all parents, regardless of gender, are crucial steps toward breaking this stigma.

1.2.2. The Sociological Trace

Puerperal culture in sociology refers to the set of beliefs, practices, rituals, and social norms that surround the postpartum period—the time after childbirth when a woman is recovering physically and emotionally, and a newborn is being integrated into the family and society. Rather than seeing childbirth as only a biological event, sociology treats the puerperal phase as a deeply cultural and social experience, shaped by traditions, gender roles, family structures, and community expectations.

The father's position in puerperal culture (pregnancy and postpartum) has typically been determined by long-held traditional cultural values regarding gender, caregiving, and family roles. Many cultures, such as those found throughout India, have viewed pregnancy and postpartum as being solely the woman's area. The primary caregiver is usually the mother; however, in addition to her, the maternal role of the grandmother and/or mother-in-law play a critical role in providing care, support and guidance to the new mother for her recovery process, caring for the newborn and providing for the family's needs. Because of these traditional gender expectations, the father plays an indirect role during these times as he has been defined by his cultural expectations to be slightly on the periphery of the caregiving circle while the women provide support for the mother through the recovery process, care for the newborn, and family care.

The father's role during this time is often expressed more through responsibilities than through the act of helping with the physical act of nurturing; he provides for his family and meets their needs, providing basic supplies for his family to live comfortably with enough food, clothing, heat, and warmth, plus providing necessary medical help for both mother and baby to ensure they will be able to have a normal life. The

father takes on these responsibilities without being seen as a competitor, because he is not always the physical helper; instead, he provides the means or ways for his wife to nurture their child (such as being the one who supplies the food she needs to feed the child), while also being an authority on many of the decisions made about how to care for the child and what will be done in supporting his family's daily life (such as deciding on what medical procedures will be performed on the child). It is during important social and ceremonial occasions (like baths, or maintaining contact with family and friends on the birthdates of their children), that the role and importance of the father is shown to others through the way the father participates in these important rituals and traditions.

These practices have developed out of centuries-old cultural attitudes toward birth and post-natal care that link these events to women, with their feminine wisdom and experience. The concepts of purity, isolation, and maternity correlate; thus, creating an area of safety for the mother as well as keeping her isolated from the male presence, placing an expectation on the man to remain at a distance. Consequently, "caregiving" is considered feminine; however, "provision" and "protection" are viewed as masculine. Thus, the father's feelings are frequently unexpressed during this period, yet the father often feels anxious, responsible, and desires to bond with the infant.

For example- In Nambudiri Brahmin postpartum practices, postpartum practices of the Nambudiri Brahmins are located in a patriarchal and patrilineal society, however these practices are highly ritualised. After delivering a child women often go into seclusion based on ideas of impurity and purity at childbirth; therefore women's ritual care of themselves during this time is predominantly conducted by other women in the husband's house, not by women from natal families.

A father has a large influence at a patriarchal level through lineage and authority, however, he does not have as much direct influence by providing physical care for the mother and baby shortly after they are born due to ritual restrictions on men performing physical care for women after giving birth. The father's importance is centered on ensuring continuity through both providing a child's name and integrating the child into the patriarchal and religious order; thus a father's role in parenting becomes apparent as the mother's seclusion from the outside world comes to an end. Then the father takes an active parenting role by providing a consistent discipline, teaching, and passing down traditions to the child.

1.3.1.The Prevalence In The Indian Society

Paternal Postnatal Depression is still considered as a stigma. We have all heard about postpartum Depression, but Paternal postnatal Depression is unknown to most people. It has not yet been thoroughly studied. The study of Paternal Postnatal Depression gained a little importance in the 20th century as mental health research got established and expanded more and societal attitudes towards men's emotional well-being evolved. However, Depression in fathers remained relatively understudied compared to Maternal Depression. In recent times, there has been a growing recognition of the prevalence and impact of Paternal Postnatal Depression on fathers, its effect on families, and children. When a father is affected by paternal postnatal depression, it impacts their kids in various ways. Children may feel sadder or more worried, and they might act out more. It could also make it harder for kids to learn and do well in school. Additionally, if a father is dealing with paternal postnatal depression, he might spend less fun time with his kids, which can make them feel less close. This situation can also make home feel more stressful for everyone. ("Understanding The Relationship Between Paternal Postnatal Depression and Family Environment," 2024, #)

Paternal Postnatal Psychiatric Illnesses: A Clinical Case Book, by Shaila Misri is a landmark work that

highlights social, emotional and cultural upheaval that fathers may experience during the postpartum period. This volume also puts paternal postpartum depression into conversation with other psychiatric comorbidities, including various personality disorders, anxiety disorders, and addictions. The text also addresses the various stigmas associated with paternal postpartum struggles. Research on the emotional effects on Indian men is relatively scarce, but there is a growing understanding that caregivers are stressed, anxious, and depressed around their partner's postpartum depression (PPD). It is clear that the relationship between couples and families is affected by the emotional strain of PPD. This invariably impacts the mental health of the father.

The emotional and psychological changes that fathers go through after having a baby are an important aspect of childbirth and mental health that is usually overlooked. Traditionally, the majority of attention surrounding postnatal mental illness has been directed towards mothers. However, Shaila Misri's work shows that fathers experience many of the same emotional and psychological stresses after their child is born.

Postpartum psychological disorders in fathers range from a variety of conditions including major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder and adjustment disorder which are prevalent in most men for the 12 months following birth. Misri points out that it can often be a very emotionally difficult time for fathers due to the significant stress of transitioning to fatherhood and the expectation that fathers will be stable and supportive – this creates a confusion of emotions (excitement, obligation, anxiety and uncertainty) that can become overwhelming when there is no support for these feelings and can present in the form of clinical symptoms.

Misri shares that paternal mental health is linked to maternal mental health. When a mother suffers from postpartum depression or stress, her partner faces an increased likelihood of being distressed psychologically. The result is a cycle of silent struggle in the family where both parents attempt to cover for one another. Additionally, fathers feel excluded from the bond their partner has with her baby during those early weeks; this can result in feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, or emotional detachment.

1.3.2. Glimpse from Shaila Misri's text -A clinical case study

Paternal postpartum psychiatric illnesses are explored by Shaila Misri using case studies from her own clinical work in perinatal psychiatry. Although the individual cases that are discussed are often anonymized and integrated into the overall discussion, many of the examples contain similar themes.

One common case involves a father who is described in Misri's writing as both professionally stable and highly invested emotionally who develops psychological difficulties soon after the birth of his child. These early signs include irritability, fatigue, withdrawal emotionally from both mother and baby, and lack of connection. Instead of being sad, this new father appears angry and focused at work as a way of escaping the emotional pressure of being a dad.

Misri describes how a diagnosis of postpartum depression for the mother serves as a tipping point for the father; his hope of being an emotional support to his partner is replaced with feelings of helplessness of parenting as well as being responsible for raising her child. The sense of helplessness he develops when he is unable to assist his wife in her struggle is made worse by the fact that he lacks any experience in fulfilling the role of a nurturing husband.

Misri's examples illustrate important insights into how parents' relationships affect both parents' emotional well-being and how this affects the infant's development:

Interdependence of mental health—The father's mental health and emotional well-being are intimately connected to the mother's mental health and emotional well-being. This reinforces Misri's premise that understanding postpartum depression relates to understanding the relationship, not just the individual.

Abnormal symptom expression—The father doesn't present overtly depressed (i.e., crying, sadness). His symptoms are expressed through anger, avoidance and overwork; these symptoms are often common to men and therefore can be overlooked.

Delayed help-seeking—The father does not seek help at first because he believes it is his job to "keep it all together," reflecting societal expectations of men to suppress their emotions.

Another case reported in her article describes a father who is experiencing severe anxiety rather than depression. He constantly checks to ensure the baby is breathing, will not leave the baby alone for fear of something happening to the baby, and has repeated, intrusive thoughts regarding might harm the baby. Misri describes this type of PAR (paternal anxiety related to postpartum depression) as a mental health condition that is not limited to postpartum depression but includes anxiety disorders as well as obsessive disorders.

The strength of these case studies lies in the way Misri positions them within the context of families' daily lives. These are not extreme or rare cases but rather examples of subtle and often not easily visible distress begun within the home. Misri demonstrates that paternal distress can be easily misrepresented as indifference or irresponsibility due to the misunderstanding of the nature of psychological distress.

Through these examples, Misri supports positioning fathers in families as equal emotional participants through improved screening, couples-based interventions, and a re-definition of the role of fathers in the post-natal care of their children. Ultimately, both the arguments and the illustrations provide evidence for the relevance of paternal mental health to the health of the entire family unit; therefore, it must be considered equally as essential to the well-being of the family.

Shaila Misri's work changes how we view the postnatal period. Instead of being seen as an experience only for mothers, this time is now understood as a joint psychological journey. By placing a focus on the mental health of fathers, she is challenging old-fashioned gender stereotypes and asking for a new way of viewing the entire family's well-being during the postpartum period.

2.1. Changing The Roles

Yet, there is a gradual change to this traditional view. The cultural setting, as influenced by education, urban living, and changing expectations about gender-role behaviour, has led to the greater involvement of fathers in the perinatal period/context. As fathers are now available to support their partner by being present, they are not only viewed as the sole financial provider from afar but are also becoming more engaged and active in their role as a caregiver and an emotional partner to his partner and child. Today's fathers attend prenatal checkups and help their partners cope with the physical and emotional stress that comes with giving birth; they, too, help with baby care on a daily basis. This evolving role represents a shift in the way fatherhood is viewed; "social fatherhood" has become the new definition of fatherhood, which does not depend solely on biological and/or authoritative ability, but rather includes caring for, being present for, and emotionally involved with his partner and child. This change represents a larger shift in society.

First, it indicates that we are moving away from traditional, rigid, patriarchal roles, to a more equal and cooperative model of family life. Secondly, when fathers are involved in postpartum care, it assists them to develop a bond with their new children but also helps to relieve some of the burden or workload from

mothers, permitting them to recover from childbirth more completely and quickly. Finally, this transformation of fatherhood in puerperal culture provides a new basis for challenging traditional notions of masculinity by enabling men to express their vulnerability, tenderness, and connection to their new children without fear of judgment or stigma.

Ultimately, fatherhood in this cultural milieu is a story of transformation - from an external to an internal role, from a role of responsibility that was not visible to the public to a role of nurturing and caring that is clearly observable. These historical developments are slowly bringing fathers into closer proximity to their children during this crucial period in their lives, thereby providing fathers with the opportunity to discover and develop their own identities as nurturing fathers and contributors to family life.

2.2. Today's Burning Controversy

Raghav Chadha, Member of Parliament with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), has opened an important discussion in Parliament about paternity leave in India. During discussions he has highlighted that there are many families living in silence where two parents welcome their new child into the world yet know that only one parent will care for them (the mother). He argues that this unfairness is outdated, and we should all be working toward equality in our family lives.

He described how many fathers experience difficulty during the early days of being a dad. Fathers must sometimes choose between being part of their child's life or fulfilling their work duties. He wants to see laws changed so that every father has access to paternity leave, and no mother has to go through childbirth and recovery without support from her spouse. He notes that, although helpful, fathers are needed to provide emotional support and to share caregiving duties in the early stages of parenting.

Mr. Chadha also made it very clear that caregiving is a partnership and that the law needs to reflect this. Just as the laws reflect that fathers have a responsibility to care for their children, the Supreme Court of India has also stated that when parents separate, parenting should become a priority.

He emphasized that caregiving is not an individual responsibility; it is a collaboration, so our country's laws must reflect that fact as well. The Supreme Court of India stated recently that, while the role of the mother in raising her child is significantly important; equally important is the involvement of the father in the early years of a child's life; this should not be ignored.

At present, there still is no Indian law guaranteeing paternity leave to employees in the private sector. Employment in the private sector currently has the benefit of maternity leave, but there is no legislation guaranteeing paternity leave for men, only existing company policy. The government provides 15 days of paid paternity leave to its employees; however, this is limited and/or not applicable to all government employees. There have been previous attempts to legislate paternity leave, i.e., the Paternity Benefit Bill of 2017, but they failed.

Unlike many nations like Sweden and Norway, which already have made substantial progress in providing both parents a way to participate in raising their children at the start, this appeal by Chadha brings us back to the question of whether we should develop a more caring and equitable system that would provide support to families as a whole. ("AAP MP Raghav Chadha Calls For Paternity Leave Law In India," 2026)

Conclusion

With the birth of a child, there is also the birth of two individuals as parents. The attention and love is predominantly focussed around the baby and to some extent the mother. Our society views mothers as the sole nourishers to the newborn and hence the struggles and sufferings of new mothers are widely

discussed. However the new fathers face a sense of unawareness due to a combination of cultural expectations, traditional gender roles and the lack of proper and correct guidance. The postpartum struggles in men within our Indian society is a complex and often overlooked issue that needs attention. During this period men too face innumerable emotional and social challenges. The limited societal conversation around fatherhood leaves fathers feeling neglected, disconnected and lonely. However with greater awareness and modern perspective on parenting, more support networks for fathers would emerge, bringing a brighter and healthier paternal journey.

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