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## Understanding the silent struggle of expectant fathers

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It is normal for expectant fathers to feel lost and have an emotional breakdown. Seek help instead of brushing it under the carpet. (Unsplash/ Natasha Ivanchikhina)

For years, Sahil and Perna had yearned for a child, and when the news finally arrived, it was a dream come true. But amidst the initial euphoria, a quiet storm brewed within Sahil. As the pregnancy progressed, he found himself worrying about the life ahead, identities shifting, and dealing with Perna's mood swings. Mohit, another father-to-be, was a different kind of anxious. Financial worries gnawed at him, and the fear of losing his freedom loomed large. His body reacted to the stress, manifesting in sleepless nights, pounding headaches and an unsettled stomach.

They may be less spoken about but these stories are common among expectant fathers. While the spotlight usually shines on the physical and emotional changes in expectant mothers, the men in their lives too undergo their unique transformations. *Lounge* spoke to experts to delve deeper into this often-overlooked aspect of parenthood.

The journey to fatherhood is often painted as joyous, filled with anticipation and excitement. However, beneath the surface, expectant fathers navigate a complex landscape of emotions, from overwhelming joy to crippling anxiety.

One of the most common emotional challenges faced by expectant fathers is anxiety. This falls under the umbrella of prenatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMADs). "Emotionally, expectant fathers experience anxiety or emptiness or even fear about their ability to support their family or be a good parent. They might experience extreme strain and isolation as they perceive their concerns are less acknowledged," notes Dr. Nandita Palshetkar, Obstetrician, Gynecologist, Medical Director of Bloom IVF, Lilavati Hospital.

This anxiety can manifest physically in the form of fatigue, sleep disturbances, or headaches. Many face work-life balance challenges, managing professional demands while being present for their partners.

## **The burden of financial implications**

Another troubling factor is the financial implications of having a baby, which adds to the overall anxiety. This stress often exacerbates the concern of how to cater for a child's health care, education or day-to-day expenses. "Such stressors, in turn, create physiological disorders like hypertension, tension headaches and even digestive disorders. It can also contribute to the development of sleep disorders, which tend to add to their physical and emotional hardships," says Taylor Elizabeth Perramond, an independent emotional intelligence and etiquette coach based in Dubai.

## A shift in identity

The journey to fatherhood is not just a physical transition; it's a profound psychological shift. Many expectant fathers may feel a sense of loss as they let go of certain aspects of their previous identity. The carefree days of bachelorhood may seem distant, replaced by the responsibilities of parenthood. This can lead to feelings of grief or even inconvenience as they adjust to their new role.

"Identity shifts are a significant challenge for expectant fathers, especially those becoming fathers for the first time. They may struggle to see themselves in that role as they aren't experiencing the physical changes of pregnancy that bond mothers to the baby. This can lead to feelings of detachment or self-doubt," says Perramond.

"Being a father is a challenge for many as it means they are now moving from a carefree life to being the primary caregiver. This can shake the dynamics of masculinity, independence and free will that they'd held for so long," observes Palshetkar. Deekshaa Athwani, consultant clinical psychologist at Fortis Hospital Mulund adds, "To-be fathers often find themselves in a whirlwind of confusion and worry, grappling with their newfound responsibilities and duties. They fear a loss of autonomy, questioning how they will balance work and family life."

## **Pregnancy blues in fathers**

Couvade Syndrome is a fascinating phenomenon that some men go through during pregnancy. In this condition, they experience physical symptoms associated with pregnancy, mirroring those of their partner. These include hormonal changes that can affect their mood and behaviour, weight gain, and also nausea. "Couvade Syndrome is entirely natural for men where they find themselves dealing with empathy, hormonal fluctuations or changes influenced by their partner's pregnancy," says Palshetkar. The reason for this is unknown, but it is most likely due to stress and the psychological aspect of empathy, adds Athwani.

## **Treatments and therapies**

It is normal for expectant fathers to feel lost and have emotional outbreaks. You mustn't brush it under the carpet but instead seek help. Perramond strongly recommends counselling. "If anxiety or depression is intense, help from professionals trained in psychology could be required, perhaps in conjunction with other medications," she adds. Athwani suggests going in for therapy. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has shown efficacy in this scenario. Online platforms like TalkToAngel have specialists that offer online counselling to-be-fathers. "Other stress management skills like meditation, breathwork or physical activity can assist in minimising stress and enhancing health," says Palshetkar.

Support groups can be of great help, too. You could join a community of expectant dads. Talking to other dads-to-be about their triggers and experiences can help reduce your stress and find ways to deal with it.

Lastly, don't forget to sign up for prenatal classes. These classes can provide valuable information about pregnancy, childbirth, and newborn care. They can also help you bond with your partner and prepare for the challenges and joys of parenthood.

*Shweta Dravid writes about travel, health, wellness, mindfulness and life truths.*