healthwatch Cumberland

Paternal Wellbeing

How are you today, Dad?

September 2025

Contents

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Cumberland would like to use this space to acknowledge and thank those who got involved in our Paternal Wellbeing project. Your courage and bravery to share your paternal experiences will undoubtedly help new dads in similar situations.

Our aim of the present project was to break the stigma, and amplify your voices to be heard ultimately to influence change. Without our community getting involved, this piece of work would not be possible.

By sharing your story, a new dad just like you will feel seen and less alone. Maybe even having the courage to ask for help.

healthwatch Cumberland

Introduction

Why are we focusing on Paternal Wellbeing?

- Healthwatch Cumberland became aware of the gap in support provision for dads following our Men's Mental Health project.
- There are support groups for mums and support groups for men however, nothing specific to dads.
- As we know, there is a stigma for men speaking up about their mental health. Therefore, we took this opportunity to draw attention to the difficulties of being a new dad.

What did we do?

- Researched the background of Paternal wellbeing, what impacts it, what are the consequences of the lack of support and Cumberland Mental Health data.
- Shared a survey gathering the experiences of dads in Cumberland
- Spoke to dads about their experiences and wrote these up as case studies (anonymised storyline of their experience)

A message from our Senior Engagement Officer Chloe:

I think we have a way to go regarding men's mental health so even further with this deeper stigmatized cohort of men who are also dads.

Acknowledging the impact of a traumatic birth, a loss, infertility or post natal depression is just the start. I would like to thank each participant for giving me the privilege of hearing each story and listening to each experience.

Now to improve the wider listening ear together!

Research Background

Paternal wellbeing encompasses the physiological and psychological response to new fatherhood. There are an abundance of studies on the impact of becoming a new mother, but what about fathers? Through a review of previous literature, the paper titled "What kind of man gets depressed after having a baby? Fathers' experiences of mental health during the perinatal period", stood out as major support for this project. The paper involved an analysis of themes provided from a open survey completed by a sample of 29 fathers. They highlighted the importance of implications on fathers' mental health and the need to support them more effectively after a new baby arrives. Furthermore, the themes of a fathers' reluctance to seek support and the limited support available to them also arose (Hambidge, Cowell, Arden-Close, Mayers, 2021). Fathers responded to the survey highlighting that they feel perinatal health professionals view 'mothers as the priority'. In relation to our present project, it is clear from prior research that healthcare professionals need greater training and awareness on how to recognise fathers in need for their mental health.

The impact of fathers' depression has been linked to exacerbate mothers' emotional difficulties (Ramchandani & Psychogiou, 2009). Furthermore, this impact of expectant mothers' resulting stress, and mental health decline can have long-term effects on future outcomes for the child (Glover et al., 2020). This is possibly through the environmental experiences by the mother theorised to impact the health trajectories of the child post birth.

Additionally, the expectant fathers' poor mental health can negatively affect employment, resulting in financial or housing difficulties (Ramchandani & Psychogiou, 2009), ultimately causing distress for both parents.

Through analyses of a small scale Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (Alspac) pilot (Dragonas et al., 1992; Thorpe et al., 1992), it was found that fathers with poor mental health during the peri-natal period, had a greater likelihood to feel negatively around their fatherhood experience post birth. These fathers were also more distant with their babies, experiencing less enjoyment of taking care of their child, and were less supportive of the mother. These paternal difficulties ultimately had a negative impact on their child in later life.

When mothers in this study reported neglect by their partner or the lack of support during pregnancy, the children had a heightened likelihood to experience chronic fatigue thirteen years later (Crawley et al., 2012).

Fathers with mental health problems during the perinatal period are up to 47% more susceptible to be rated as a suicide risk than at any other point in their lifetime (Quevedo et al, 2010).

In Cumberland, the suicide rate per 100,000 was 19.0 between 2021-2023. Comparatively, the England rate was 10.7 per 100,000 highlighting that Cumberland is an area of concern. From 2020-2023 the age range for both men and women with the highest suicide rates were years 40-59. In terms of gender, it was reported that around 3 out of 4 suicides were male.

For the full reference list, please refer to Page 65

In response, the Cumbria Suicide Prevention Multi – Agency Strategic Action Plan 2024-2029 was developed. This entails multi-agency partners working together for the same goal (reduce the number of people dying by suicide in Cumbria) such as the NHS, VCFSE (Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise) and Police. There was an initial multi-agency suicide prevention strategy developed for Cumbria in 2009. Furthermore, NHS England announced in 2019 that fathers with partners accessing specialist perinatal mental health services would be screened themselves to assess their mental wellbeing. This is a step forward however, it is clear from the data that there is still a lack of focus for men's mental health especially during their parenthood journey.

Whilst this strategy by NHS England to involve fathers in the assessment for mental health care during the perinatal period is great, what about the fathers who have difficulties when baby arrives? Research has shown that over 39% of new fathers want support for their mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2018). Furthermore, 62% of fathers responded that their mental health struggles caused difficulties with forming connection with their children (Fathers Network Scotland, 2019).

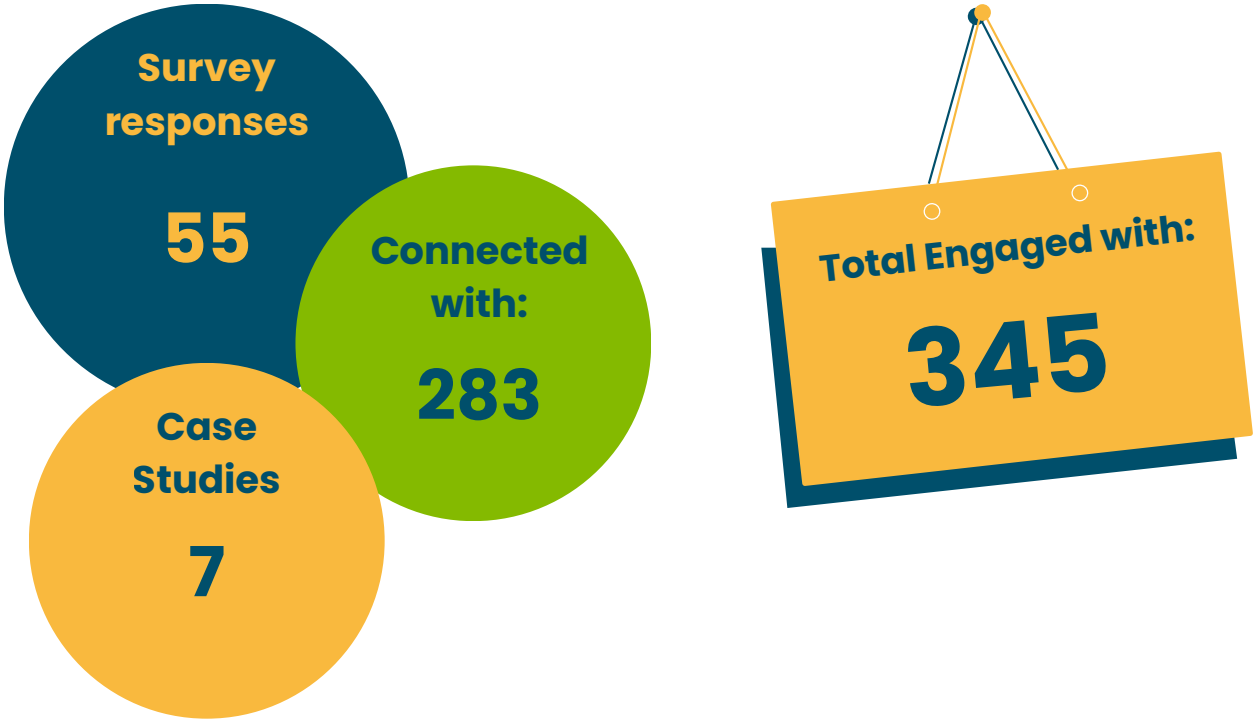
- **Healthwatch Cumberland developed this project to fill this gap of awareness for paternal wellbeing. This is following on from our Men's Mental Health project last year (2024).**
- **We aimed to break down this barrier of perceived stigma of sharing mental health difficulties, especially for fathers who felt they weren't important after being dismissed by healthcare professionals.**
- **Becoming a parent impacts dads, therefore support provision is required for them too.**

Methodology

Data Collection:

Mixed-methods survey:
Using open and closed questions, in addition to Likert scales (rating scale 1-5) to assess paternal wellbeing experiences prior and post birth.

Case Studies:
Through community engagement and promotional materials, we advertised the opportunity for fathers in our community to share their fatherhood wellbeing experiences. There was also space for contact details for those completing the survey to get in touch for more information or to take part in a case study. This data was then analysed using thematic Analysis and featured in this final report to spread awareness.

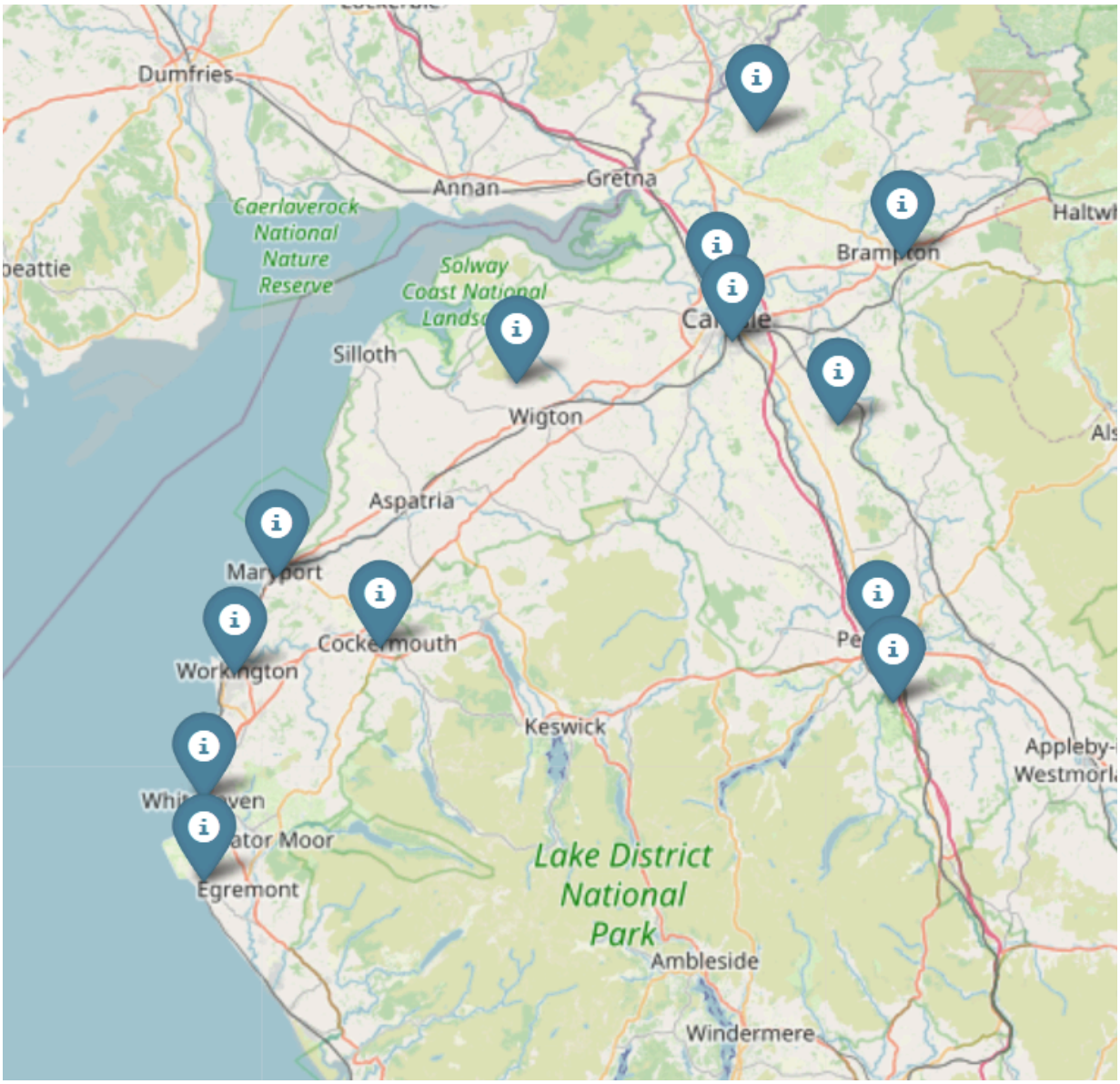


Challenges of Chosen Method

The nature of this study meant there were difficulties in recruitment of participants due to perceived stigma of talking about mental health. As discussed in the introduction, fathers don't feel like a priority to healthcare professionals during their early parenthood experiences. This reduces their confidence to speak up. To combat this, we gave fathers the opportunity to share their experiences anonymously both with case studies and survey responses which could be completed online wherever they felt comfortable.

Summary of findings

Figure 1) Map with respondents postcodes plotted, showing our reach with this project.



Healthwatch Cumberland reach:

Following the Cumbria Authority split into Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness, the Penrith area is not usually within our reach. For the purposes of this project, we were interested in where you received your care. Therefore, these responses were included due to Cumberland Infirmary providing their care.

‘And How are you today, Dad?’

In our survey, we asked if they were asked by anyone how they were doing during their parenthood journey.

*From a sample of 24 complete responses, not including case studies.

54% said **no**.

Summary of findings

Paternal Mental Health

Paternal depression has been shown to be co-morbid (related) with maternal depression. This shows that the risk of paternal postpartum depression is significantly higher when the mother is experiencing depression (Goodman, 2004; Paulson & Bazemore, 2010). Furthermore, as stated earlier, Cumberland had a significantly large suicide rate 19.0 per 100,000 between 2021-2023. In comparison, the England rate was 10.7 per 100,000 which shows that Cumberland is an area of concern.

In our Men's Mental Health report published last year, 92.8% of men responded that they have struggled with their mental health via a survey. This was from a sample of 14 men across Cumberland. If you would like to read this report, click here or visit ***https://healthwatchcumberland.co.uk/project-reports/***

65%

of responses stated they experienced a decline in their mental health during or following pregnancy.

*From a sample of 23 complete responses.

Age profile of responses:

- Ranged from 18-58 years
- 52.2% were 32-38 years

Relationship changes before, during or following pregnancy

In the first year of the child's birth, around 40-70% report a decline in their relationship with their partner (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). The change in sleep patterns to care for their child can cause tiredness, exhaustion and insomnia. Some research has shown that these sleep disturbances can negatively impact a couple's relationship post-partum (Medina et al., 2009).

39%

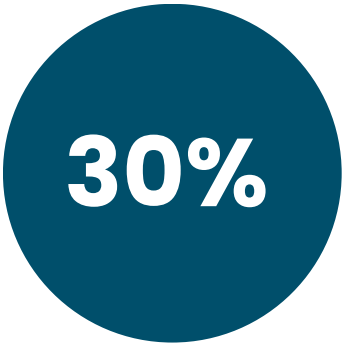
of responses stated they experienced changes in their relationship before, during or following pregnancy.

*From a sample of 23 complete responses.

Traumatic Birth Experience

Research into the psychological impact of a traumatic birth on the father's mental health outcomes. A review of six research articles developed three themes: Role of the father in the birthing environment; unpreparedness: expectation vs reality; and relationships with partner and others (Ellis & Wier, 2024).

Traumatic experiences during labour and birth significantly impact both mother and father. Fathers may develop mental health difficulties in the perinatal period, which ultimately affect their relationship with their partner and child. Effective and sufficient communication is essential to quality care provision. This review stated how Antenatal education should include all potential outcomes during labour and birth. In addition, all healthcare staff should hold the ability to assess mental health and refer to support services.



of responses stated they experienced a Traumatic Birth.

*From a sample of 23 complete responses.

Parenthood Experience

At the beginning of our Paternal Wellbeing Survey and Case Study script, we asked about experiences they may have faced during their parenthood journey. This was using a prepared list of experiences we created with the addition for other responses if not stated in our list. Examples include: Early & Late Miscarriages, High Risk Pregnancy and Decline in Mental Health.

of responses stated they experienced an Early Miscarriage (before 12 weeks).

*From a sample of 23 complete responses.

In 2023, according to a YouGov Survey, 50% of adults in the UK said that they, or someone they know, had experienced at least one form of pregnancy or baby loss.

Summary of findings

In our survey, we asked if the respondent had experienced thoughts of ending their life as a result of their early parenthood experiences.

35% said **yes.** *From a sample of 23 complete responses.

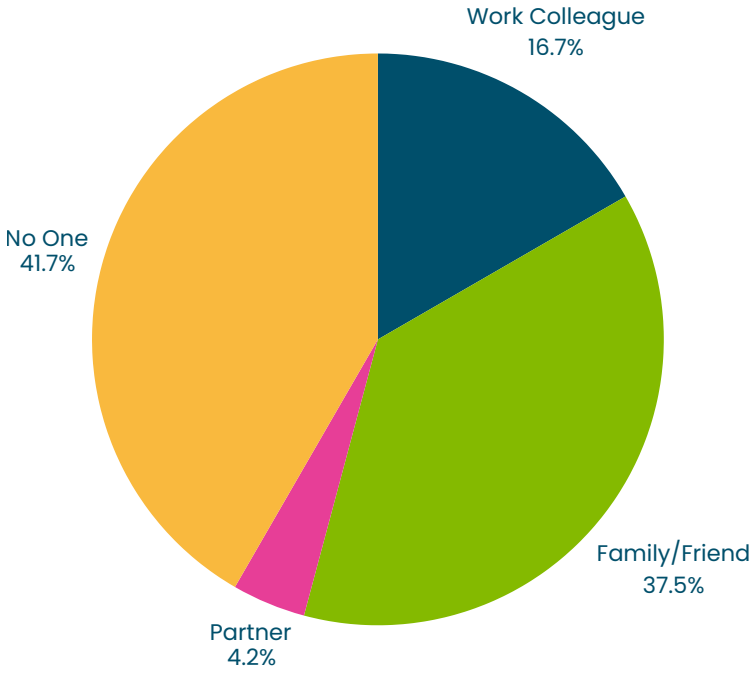
Furthermore, we asked if they were asked by anyone how they were doing during their parenthood journey.

54% said **no.** *From a sample of 24 complete responses.

And yet, we know Males in the UK are those at the highest risk of taking their own lives.

Who asked how you were doing?

It should be noted here, the lack of healthcare professionals checking in with the fathers. This data reinforces the view that all the focus is on the mother and baby.



*From a sample of 20 complete responses.

Collection of Case Studies

Members of our community courageously shared their paternal wellbeing experiences to aid 'break the stigma'. The following content may be distressing for some to read.

We asked each participant to describe how they felt after completing their case study with us...

"I feel that I was able to openly express my experience.

We have had an open and honest discussion.

I think I had more going on during that time than I realised, it's nice to reflect.

That season of life was full on. "

"Cathartic, it is very revealing how far back I can remember. It is great to be reflective. I have felt comfortable talking about it in this free-flowing way. "

"A bit drained. My mental mess – health anxiety, tricky to manage. It does my head in. "

"It's been good being able to tell someone about what happened, it's the first time anyone has asked me about it."

"It's the most I've talked to anyone. It's reassuring that I'm not alone.

When I saw the poster, I felt immediately seen. I didn't realise until then I had a problem."

"Fine, cathartic. It's good to talk and have it on paper, talking is helpful.

I felt that you get me, makes a big difference. I have a desire to make change and use my experience for good."

"Cathartic. Thought provoking. Therapeutic I hope that this is useful to others, as was useful for me.

Informal style which made it more relaxed and was helpful."

Case Study 1: “It’s not about you.”

This individual was brought up in the North East before relocating to West Cumbria for family reasons. Recently, he became a father for the third time. This has been a great opportunity for him to be a much more ‘Hands on Dad”, which wasn’t possible for his other children.

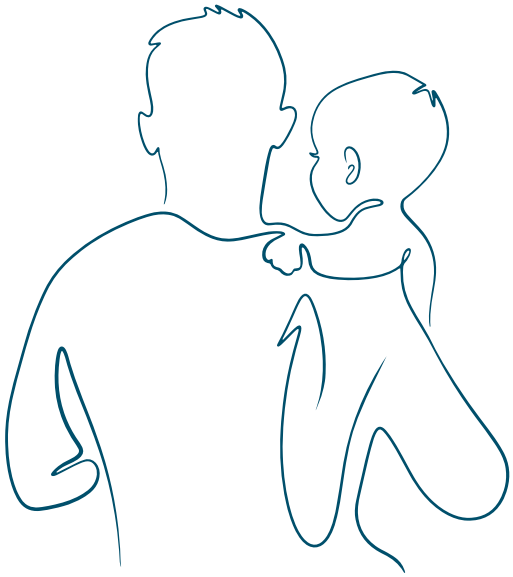
He spoke to us about his struggles with addiction in the past and various mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Becoming a dad again has been challenging for them but he is ‘determined’ to dedicate himself to this new life change.

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

> I was shocked at first and a little worried as my relationship with the child's mum has been very difficult. Once I came to terms with it, I was excited as I haven’t had chance for various reasons to be a proper hands on Dad with my other children.

Paternal experience:

- Traumatic Birth Experience
- High Risk Pregnancy
- Decline in Mental Health during or following pregnancy
- Relationship changes before, during or following pregnancy



> “When we found out my partner was pregnant, my initial thoughts were worry. We hadn't been in the relationship long and were going through a bad patch as it was. We both suffer from mental health issues and I knew this would create further anxiety and stress.”

My Story:

The pregnancy was okay for the first few months however, my partner was complaining about being very tired and I could see her anxiety had increased, as had mine. We went for the 32 week scan and were told that she had a low lying placenta and it was likely that she was going to have a C-Section. The next couple of months were very difficult, my partners mental health issues got worse and although I was suffering too, I didn't feel like I could say anything. I don't have any friends or family in the area so I felt very isolated and alone with the stress.

We had a mental health coordinator who was helping us as well as a parental team, but I felt like it was only my partners mental health that was being taken care of which is fine, but **I was having struggles too**. Having been an addict only a few years ago, I was obviously worried about that as I had worked hard to get on top of it so didn't want to go down that route again.

Although the pregnancy itself was difficult, even up until the day before, there was confusion whether we would have a natural birth or a C-section, all increasing our anxiety levels. Our baby girl was in fact born C-Section and we eventually took her home.

My partner did have issues for a while with her C-Section scar not healing properly which meant she struggled to do a lot of the things she would normally do. The first few weeks were really difficult, the baby was very unsettled and this put pressure on our relationship. Both of us were also struggling with our mental health and I felt totally alone.

My partner was having visits from Healthcare professionals who were seeing to all her needs but not once did anyone ask me how I was doing. I have no family or friends in the area, **my only escape or outlet was taking the dog out for a walk** for a short while as I couldn't leave my partner in the house on her own really. I mentioned to the Health care visitor that I was struggling a little and she actually said to me **"Its not about you"**.

After a couple of months, it came to a point where for his own mental health, the decision was made to move out of the house.

> I'm still a hands on daily Dad but I couldn't be in the relationship any longer. Things are a little better now, I feel a bit more settled but I'm still without any family or friends to talk to. I go to the Men's coffee morning once a week where I'm starting to meet some people and talk about things which is great.

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

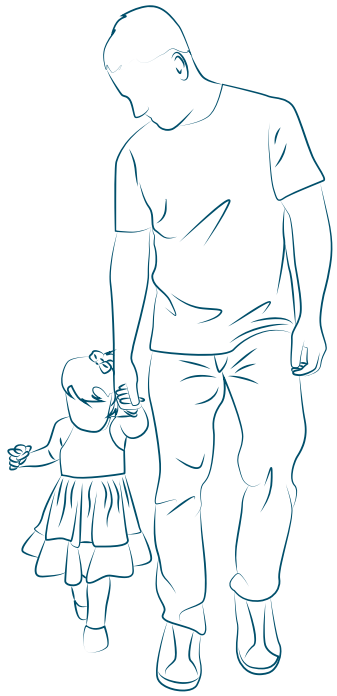
Was there any offer of support from anyone?

"No they didn't, I wish they had so I could have told someone how I was feeling. Not having any family or friends in the area makes it very difficult. It's very frustrating as the mum seems to get lots of help and people asking how she is.. which is fine, but maybe it would have been good for someone to have asked me".

> **I didn't say anything because I didn't want to seem like I was moaning.**

How has this experience impacted your life?

"As I've said, I've struggled with addictions in the past and continue to struggle with poor mental health, this all made it worse. I felt alone and ignored, like I wasn't able to speak up as no one would be interested. Luckily I had the dog which gave me an excuse to get out of the house for a break for a short while, it's been a life saver."

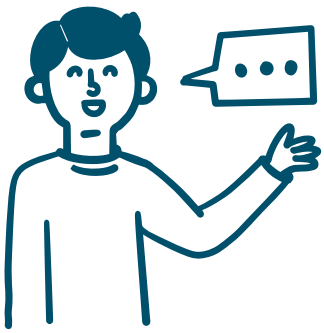


What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

“When a family are expecting a baby everything seems to be aimed towards the mother, Dad's don't seem to get any support at all, not even asked how they are doing in passing. That might not be everyone's experience but that was mine. I've had three kids and this was the same with them all.

Maybe there could be some support groups for new Dad's. There are things like Andy's men's club and the coffee morning I go to at Workington but nothing specific to being a new Dad, at least not that I know of. If there had been I would definitely have gone.”

> **“Dads should be told it’s ok to speak up.”**



What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

“Speak to someone, anybody, it doesn't really matter who. It’s difficult being a new parent, everyone struggles, it’s nothing to be ashamed of”.

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood

Exciting
Hard work
Rewarding

The realities of parenthood

Stressful
Tiring
Rewarding

Your experience

Lonely
Anxious
Proud

Case Study 2:
“It’s not failure, it’s a learning process.“

I moved to Cumbria at age 11 for my dad’s job. I was bullied during these years because of my accent. I was born down south in Exeter and at around 2 years old my family moved to Wales.

My dad left the family home early on which I think has definitely impacted my own parenting journey. It’s difficult looking back on this time. Parental absence and bullying are now causes I am strongly against.

I work in security but due to start working in Residential Care. In my spare time, I volunteer for AMC, and I believe in the power of voice for young lads. We’re all on the same team and I want to improve the experience of men’s mental health.

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

> Scared. It wasn’t planned; we weren’t living together. Fatherhood wasn’t on my radar, I came from a broken home, and I never thought it would happen.
>
> I have so much guilt surrounding this. I wanted to adventure, to travel, without these commitments. It sounds selfish but I just couldn’t see it. I think it was more fear, I didn’t want to let anyone down.
>
> I am pleased to say I’ve surprised myself and they’ve changed me, my kids have given me a reason to live.

Paternal experience:

- Early Miscarriage (Before 12 weeks)
- Becoming a Single Parent
- Decline in your Mental Health during or following pregnancy
- Relationship changes before, during or following pregnancy
- Other (please specify): Partner both experienced Post-Natal Depression

My Story:

In 2006, I met my ex-partner and she got pregnant in 2007. It was definitely a surprise. Unexpected and unplanned.

It was quite a straightforward pregnancy, I was involved in the scans, went to the baby groups, etc and sold my house to move in together. Our baby was born in January 2008, after 27 hours of labour!

My partner was almost immediately diagnosed with postnatal depression; she wasn't engaging with the baby. I was working shifts and having the baby in between days off. Totally burning out.

My mental health hit the floor, totally frazzled. I was definitely depressed. I had a vision of what a happy family would look like, but this was far from that, I had dreamed of redeeming my own experience with my own family but there was nothing in return. **I just felt so done**.

I had no support. I was shouldering it all, giving it 100% all the time, it wasn't sustainable. Within the year, I had to go to the GP to tell someone. Nobody asked me how I was, I did find it helpful talking to someone I didn't know, like a Dr or professional.

I couldn't speak to family or friends as I feared that I was being a burden. The criticism, the pressure, the guilt, it was too much.

You feel like a second-class citizen against the mum, you're 'just the dad!'. When our child was around 2, the relationship had fully broken down.

"There were a lot of issues, I felt that my child was being used as a pawn. The goal posts kept being moved. I was doing my best, but I was getting slagged off and being dragged through the mud. It eventually led to me taking my partner to court when our child was only 7 years old. I had to gain stability for custody because our child was suffering with the inconsistency.

This whole process impacted me significantly, I had a fear of reading messages, answering the phone. I lived feeling like a failure, when you're told how rubbish you are all the time, it's hard not to believe it".

I met a new partner which caused friction and issues with seeing my child. The pressure to appease both and still be a good dad was intense.

Naturally due to my first experience, I was reluctant to have more children, but my new partner wanted it and if I'm being honest about it now, I felt a lot of emotional blackmail. The relationship would have ended if we didn't pursue having a baby. We started trying for a baby and unfortunately, in 2013 we had a miscarriage. It wasn't talked about. We kept it secret. It is a shame that nobody ever asked how I felt about that loss. We were both realistic about expectations and continued to try and successfully conceived. My partner was worried in the early days, hyper vigilant and on edge for bad news.

In 2015, after 4 years, we had a baby. We were in a good place, engaged to be married and we were all getting along well.

I was hopeful for a different experience.

Once baby was born, I watched the relationship with partner and my eldest change. It was so hard. Then the dynamic between my partner and family became complex, I felt like I had to choose between her and them. The home was so intense, constantly walking on eggshells.

The old feelings came back as history repeated itself. My partner was diagnosed with postnatal depression.

I was unhappy and disappointed; **I was doing my best but felt like a failure.** The relationship disintegrated and I moved out, I was back on anti-depressants and the suicidal thoughts returned. I was being abused but didn't realise that until years later, I had become a victim of control and coercion. When I couldn't be controlled anymore, the kids became a pawn to control. Hard to not think, am I the problem here?!

So I moved out in 2018. I was back to the beginning, rebuilding from scratch. New home, seeing kids on a schedule and had the stigma of being a single parent. Struggling with the stigma of being "the one who left". I had a lot of time alone. Even now, years on, when my kids go back to their mums its lonely, the house is empty. I think society and people think I'm living a full, free life but I just wish I could read them another story, do another bedtime.

Men are taking a stand against society. We are learning our worth, standing up for our parental rights, not willing to compromise our values. I've spent years topping up other people's glasses, now it's my turn. It's important that my daughters see that I have overcome my mental health issues and I have learned to stand up for myself. I respect my ex-partners as they've raised my kids, but I will never compromise my boundaries like that again.

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

Was there any offer of support from anyone?

"Not really. Mum and one friend would check in, but all support is geared to mum and baby. I agree with it but it's grossly disproportionate. There's 3 people in the mix, not 2.

Mum and dad have an equal role to play in a child's development. "

How has this experience impacted your life?

"I understand and appreciate my own mum better because I'm now a parent. You don't know until you have kids, the realities of the sacrifices made.

The impact has been on my personality, I'm much more private, introverted and withdrawn than before. I have evolved emotionally, more mature. I'm keen to use my struggles to improve and I hope to change the path for others. I think that mentally, that will make me a better dad."

What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

"We have a responsibility to provide and protect but we bleed, cry and struggle just like anyone. Human first, parent second.

I would like to see a change in pre and post parenthood for Dad's- where can they go once kids come? There is a need specifically for support for dads.

I used to work in a very male-dominated workplace who are miserable. The culture is toxic. They are overpaid so they never leave. I think management of big companies and organisations, have a responsibility to do more for their employees. Especially those in a more male-dominating career."

What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

"Find relatable people, offload, Andy's Man Club, whatever!

You will learn to understand yourself better. Allow yourself to be inspired by others and then eventually, inspire others.

Reach out if needed. Professional help, self-help and peer support is key!"

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood

Joy
Contentment
Fear

The realities of parenthood

Tiring
Surprising
Rewarding

Your experience

Horrendous
Depressing
Life-changing

Case Study 3: “I felt helpless.”

I am 40 years old. I grew up in West Cumbria. I had a spot on upbringing; village life and I loved school. I lived with my parents and my sister. I was lucky, had no struggles growing up.

I went to Newcastle college to get my music degree, where I met my wife. We lived there for a few years, I was teaching piano and doing some gigs. However, my dad had a heart attack, and soon after my Mam was diagnosed with Cancer, so we moved back home to Cumbria in 2012.

My daughter Evie was born in 2015.

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

> Absolutely buzzing. I was really excited to become a parent. It was planned but it took longer than expected to conceive, but we are just the type of people who look for solutions so I don’t see that period of time as particularly difficult.

Paternal experience:

- Baby Loss
- Traumatic Birth Experience
- High Risk Pregnancy
- Decline in your mental health during or following pregnancy
- Baby needing specialist care following birth (Neonatal Unit/Special Care Baby Unit)

My Story:

It was a straightforward pregnancy until the 20-week scan. At the 20 weeks scan we found out she was poorly, and her heart wasn't correctly developed. They began foetal care, drawing fluid from my wife with big needles. We were back and forth to Newcastle.

The scan was a terrible experience. The staff were talking about us like we weren't there, we were unable to see what we needed. There was no compassion. The consultant was openly googling health complications. Essentially they couldn't see parts of the heart. They mentioned a large Ventricular Septal Defect (hole in the heart), but at this point we felt like it could be okay.

We were soon sent to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, due to this incredibly rare and complex health issue. We found that the cardiologist was fine but the consultant suggested termination, which we pushed back. You can never account for the will of a baby. It would have devastated our lives. At this stage, the only diagnosis was her heart condition, and we knew that there were procedures available. Before she was born there were discussions around how she would need around 3 surgeries and probable heart transplant in her teens.

As the pregnancy continued, there were issues with swallowing. We learned at this point that our baby had a trachea-oesophagus fistula so would be a 'TOF baby'. This meant we would have to have the baby and stay in Newcastle.

37 weeks was full term. So, at 36 weeks, my wife started feeling sick and in pain (Friday). We rang the ward at our local hospital West Cumberland Hospital, they said to call the GP. The GP recommended to call a midwife who told us to go to the ward. Despite the birth plan and the medical advice that we should be in Newcastle, a random man on the ward said that our baby could be born there. We insisted that the ward contact our doctor, who sent an ambulance. We had to travel separately to Newcastle and met at the maternity ward. We were keen for natural labour, but she needed induced in the end. On the Monday, Evie was born.

During the labour I never felt separated from the experience. I was just trying to coach my wife through it. It was very intense. I think naively, that I was very hopeful that the baby would just be alright so in that moment I couldn't think about what was going to happen once she arrived. The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit were ready waiting for arrival. My wife only got to hold her briefly before she got whisked away. All the attention was on getting my wife sorted at that point. A short while after, I went to see the baby in Special Care Baby Unit. There were arguments about her needs and whether she needed urgent surgery. We weren't prepared for her to need surgery that day, so that was unexpected. Later that night, we walked with the Dr and our baby to the theatre.

Within a day, Evie had been operated on. Unfortunately, the surgeon advised that the surgery hadn't been successful, and her case was worse than expected. It meant that we needed to be in hospital for the foreseeable, which was 6 months.

We were lucky, she got 100% of our attention, both parents together, we received full pay from work and we had no distractions. It was our first baby so we could truly be with her.

We just kept learning how complex her health was, her little body was so complicated.

We were soon moved to Paediatric Intensive Care Unit in the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle where friends and family could visit. Not long after, she had a Cardiac Arrest and ultimately died in front of us. The focus was now onto her lungs, they simply weren't working. Unfortunately, the experience there was appalling, when we were in the RVI we were "her parents" but in the Freeman we were "in their way".

We went back to RVI as soon as we could. We were soon offered us a surgery called "an oesophagus ostomy" which we knew meant that she could possibly come home. However, it was discovered that the TOF had re-grown which is very rare! Apparently we had more chance of winning the lottery. It was explained that this is likely what had caused the cardiac arrest.

I felt helpless. I want to be a parent but it's just an unrealistic expectation. My role was condensed down to nappy changing. Although we were both constantly reading stories, talking and singing to her. The people on SCBU thought we were weird.

The RVI was excellent. In the Freeman, we felt that it was a difficult bed space, we had too many questions, we were constantly curious but we just had a desperate narrative of understanding. I just had to know, it meant that every answer was another voice in my head silenced.

If I was to offer you the world's best surgeon – would you turn that away? No of course not. So when you've got the expert on that child in the room – why would you ignore it?

After 6 months of surgeries, tests and pain, we got Evie home for 3 weeks until she crashed. Back in the RVI, new heart issues were found so we were transferred to Freeman again, which unsurprisingly was another awful experience.

We tried one last surgery which wasn't successful so that meant we had to start the discussions about the end of treatment. In comparison, the RVI was compassionate, kind and clear. On the other hand, the Freeman was detached and looking at their phone. Our priority at that point was getting Evie back to the RVI, during our 10 minutes in the ambulance there were lots of issues, her body was failing before our eyes.

When we were back, we had a conversation with a trusted consultant. We agreed with the consultant to withdraw care and start to prepare for death. Going through my head was just shock, it was unexplainable, I wasn't really taking anything in, but I had to stay positive.

We brought Evie home that night. My Dad helped me bring her home and the funeral director was able to advocate for our family.

After several months of poking, prodding and constant noise. She passed away and there was just peace and silence. Came home and spent time without worrying. It was peaceful but filled with lots of guilt. As a parent, never knowing if there's anything that could have been done.

Finding the humour in the darkness is key.

In 2016 we had our second pregnancy, which for obvious reasons was worrying. Our treatment was fast tracked as we were deemed risky. In all honesty we were fearful and anxious all the way through. Once the baby was born, we were keen to get out of hospital as soon as possible but there were some communication issues with the doctor, about whether they had heard a murmur on heart / fat neck indicator which we resolved.

In 2018 we had our 3rd pregnancy, which thankfully was straight forward and drama free.

We have spent our time putting energy into Evie's legacy and the charity. I remember a doctor said that there's such a thing as Post Traumatic Growth Syndrome, which is true for me.

We have all learned so much from Evie and about the loss of a sibling on the other kids. So their understanding of loss, how they are in a strong position to deal with grief and that they're still in their siblings lives – just in a different format.

We host a remembrance event that has lots of kids playing and talking to each other about their siblings or loved one. It is the truest form of peer support for those who know what it means to lose a brother or sister.

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

Was there any offer of support from anyone?

"Throughout the hospital stay we got offered a psychologist and we turned it down. Until a few months later, we accepted therapy. It was life changing, until then, I had no clue."

How has this experience impacted your life?

“Total change. Massive impact. It changed who I am and how I see the world completely. Positively and negatively.”

“Immeasurable impact. “

What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

“Stuff is changing but it’s too fluffy.

In terms of dads in hospitals, dads must be included throughout. It is all directed at mum, even though you are there. I understand that medically its appropriate but there’s got to be more for dads around actually coping with the life changing experience of a baby.

A percentage of pregnancies end in permanent loss. You’re constantly expecting the worst. As a minimum a previous bereavement should be on the mums notes and acknowledged in appointments to help manage.”

What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

“Take all the help offered, be open minded.
Make the most of the nice people. Be confident! Ask questions! Speak up for yourself!”

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood

Happiness
Love
Fun

The realities of parenthood

Love
Worry
Tired

Your experience

Positivity
Trauma
Faith

Case Study 4: “I was naïve to ‘feeling ok’.”

I grew up in rural Cumbria in a stable home. I am a teacher, who lives an active lifestyle. I enjoy running and travelling with my family. I am now a parent to 3 teens.

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

“Positive. I was excited to become a dad.”

“Me and my wife felt relatively young, we hadn’t long been married. Our peers weren’t there yet but we were so ready.”

“Having kids made us grow up quite quickly, but overall we were very excited. We weren’t anxious about what to expect, I had a picture of what I hoped, and we were both teachers, so we liked kids.”

Paternal experience:

- Early Miscarriage (Before 12 weeks)

Me and my partner had 2 kids and were expecting baby 3 in 2009. We had no issues with the pregnancy until the 12-week scan. I remember the Sonographer left the room and brought someone else in. There was a few minutes of silence. They said that there was no heartbeat, something about ‘not compatible with life’. It was so unexpected; this was a routine appointment and there had been no warning.

We went from being ok to not ok, whilst in the moment I remember feeling unnerved. It was a sense of being told something we didn’t want to hear. It was a complicated balance of assurance that the staff acknowledged it was sad, but it was otherwise cold and clinical. Upon reflection, knowing that a miscarriage is a possibility could have been helpful but how it is delivered matters.

My Story:

We were given a moment to feel the gravity of it. I have no other experience to compare it to. It was delivered kindly but with no emotion. There was no wish to act there and then. The process was explained, mostly to my wife, and we were given a leaflet. We went away and were brought back in for procedure and to start the medication. The experience was traumatic, it felt like there was no ownership, lots of unnamed professionals.

Delivering a foetus is awful, it is all very clinical. It felt like they weren't quick enough, like it was being dragged out somehow. The trauma of the procedure and witnessing my wife faint and struggle on with the procedure, all without emotional interaction was awful. It was clear that there are cultural differences across the staff and how some may be deemed as cold, or they could just be projecting their own experiences onto us.

In my experience, the focus was on the mum and rightly so, as it happens to their body. I became a 'support' to the person it was happening to. The focus is on the physical and visibly upset mum. There is a stereotype of being the protector and supportive husband; the male is mostly ignored in a situation like this.

Afterwards they just asked, "do you want to take the foetus home or for it to be incinerated?" how can I answer that?! An image in my mind was that it would be disposed into a bin shoot. It wasn't like we were prepared, or we had planned for this, so we had to choose quickly. It would have been nice for someone to lead us through the process. Be with us in the moment, it would only take 5 minutes.

We decided that we would take them home and do our own thing, we also eventually planted a tree.

My wife understandably needed to have some time off work, but unfortunately her employer was not very supportive. There was a pressure to get back as soon as possible. We both worked in the same place so there were some conflicting feelings. There was limited support for me as a colleague and a husband.

On the surface, my wife's experience was visibly more upsetting, but I felt the pressure to support and not grieve openly myself. To be helpful and positive rather than encouraging us to sit in it, to heal and process, even if it's upsetting. I was naïve to 'feeling ok.' Because I was denying my feelings, this meant that I was not processing.

We were just left to it, we did ok, but I can see how others wouldn't.

Understanding the harm of unresolved trauma is key to healing. It's vital to bring in professional intervention to assist. When we did this, it was an opportunity to talk together, but the validation earlier would have been a great chance to understand trauma, to be given a language and the literacy for future prevention.

People asked how we were, like my family and church community although perhaps not specifically to me. Just because men are in a 'community' it doesn't mean they get asked how they are, there needs be an intentionality to it!

My wife had the desire to get pregnant again shortly after. However, I felt we less convinced but still open to this. My wife wanted one for the sake of closure, but I didn't know for sure what I was feeling about it.

I'm pleased to say we did go on to have another baby, who is also aware of the miscarriage prior to her being born.

This time the 12-week scan was a completely different experience, we were both anxious, lots of deep breathes, and bizarrely there was no acknowledgement of our previous loss. I wasn't sure if the notes were read. Thankfully the pregnancy progressed uneventfully, and we delivered a healthy baby girl.

I later learned that my parents had experienced miscarriages, but it was seldom spoken about. Perhaps I would have had some more insight if my Dad had spoken about it more openly?

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

Was there any offer of support from anyone?

"Family, church, community, some colleagues. There was no professional check ins or signposts. Down the line we heard repeatedly how common it is, but it is said so flippantly. It feels like the loss didn't matter. The message should be that yes its common, but so is grief. With the right support and qualified therapy, healing can be done."

How has this experience impacted your life?

"The impact of this experience felt like a 'before and after' in the first instance; it takes 3-4 months to navigate grief. We did this solo without intervention or other support which perhaps put us at a disadvantage.

Having a third child, which comes from having a full and busy life, brought closure. We do have a tree, we go on walks, listen to certain songs. My wife is more intentional about marking the anniversary. I suppose that I could be better at recognising the significance.

I wouldn't have said that I had any mental health issues before, but now upon reflection, I probably did as most people do. Following a period of work-related stress, the loss of my mum and the magnitude of grief, caused my mental health to decline."

What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

“Being aware that there’s a deeper challenge from the stigma of a man opening-up. Many men feel like the right / strong thing to do is to say “fine”, but ‘we’ have got to push harder and dig deeper. The stigma is in the minds of families, society, partners. It can feel selfish to be honest. I would also like to see a change in the way information is shared.“

What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

“Reach out for professional support with an open mind and being keen to learn the biology of trauma / feelings etc.

Be aware that there are people trained to talk - try that for yourself! Talking therapies are not “woo-woo”, in fact it can be super helpful to understanding yourself better. I encourage you to find the courage to try.”

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood

Pressure
Joy
Tiring

The realities of parenthood

Fascinating
Connection
Complex

Your experience

Clinical
Satisfactory
Confusing

Case Study 5:
“Nobody really talks about the real-life stuff”

“Age 46 and I’m originally from North Dorset. Life was good, I grew up in a nice town with ample opportunities for us.

I grew up with my mum and dad who have been married 52 years, and my little sister, who is 6 years younger. We moved house and then my sister was born all within a short space of time so there was some big changes.

I knew that my parents had experienced a miscarriage prior to her being born, so they were really happy. I wasn’t quite so much! Sadly my dad lost his job and that meant they both needed to work multiple jobs and as our Grandparents were old school, there was never any discussions around money or support but ultimately, I would say I had a very stable and secure upbringing.”

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

“Delighted. Chuffed.”

Paternal experience:

- Early Miscarriage (Before 12 weeks)

> Me and my wife felt like we were trying to get pregnant for ages, probably around 16 months. My partner eventually fell pregnant but sadly we miscarried at 8 weeks. We went to see the GP and got scanned the next day and in that moment our world fell apart, but nobody knew.
>
> We had followed the “12-week rule” where you don’t tell people until you get to 12 weeks pregnant but let me tell you, it’s a desolate place. We named our baby, ‘Baby Lentil’. I remember that the nurse was compassionate but very direct and professional. They did include me and spoke to us both throughout.

My Story:

We went home and just cried. Thankfully work was very supportive so it meant I could be present. I became her practical support, I became more intentional with my time. The next day we went walking and I think walking together, helped us both cope and it brought us closer.

Around 2-3 months later we started trying again. It took a while for us to both be on the same page, but we were naturally worried about missing our chances.

My wife was on medication to help her conceive but the Gynaecology team couldn't find any issues. She was encouraged to join the IVF list but fell pregnant naturally. Which was great. However, my wife was more muted in her excitement, but we did decide to share the news with some close friends early on this time. My wife was extra conscious of having a heathier lifestyle.

In September 2019, baby C was born. We'd always wanted a daughter called C; she is now 5. Thankfully it was a straightforward pregnancy and birth; my wife was understandably super cautious. The delivery was normal. It felt well supported by the staff, I felt included, I was spoken to regularly and checked in on.

Home life was tough, I remember if we'd got out the house before it was dark out, we felt like we had won at life. Baby C was a good sleeper though, a very settled baby but we were very tired – all the time! As we had no family nearby, we were pretty much doing it solo.

We started trying again for another baby when baby C was 1. My wife fell pregnant in Jan 2021 but sadly miscarried at 3 weeks, it was a significant bleed and she felt quite unwell, so we called the GP. They said they didn't need to see her but just let it pass and stay at home if not in too much pain. It felt like whiplash as we had just learned we were expecting to then learning that we had lost the baby.

We started trying again a month later and learned we were expecting the following summer. In Feb 2022, we had our son, baby D. The pregnancy and birth were straightforward. He was a happy and healthy baby, no issues, weighed a chunky 9lb 5oz. I was working nights at the time so we were both very tired. That type of exhaustion is truly underestimated.

It was strangely easier than expected having 2 kids. We were a lot more relaxed about everything this time round, which probably helped.

Over the years we have fostered children on and off and after a short break, we now foster as a family of 4. We have had some lovely opportunities to care for some older children alongside our 2.

Currently we are hosting a child and we have a full house which is how we like it.

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

Was there any offer of support from anyone?

"Nobody really asks you about the reality of having a young family.
Nobody really talks about the real-life stuff."

How has this experience impacted your life?

"My wife wrote a book to help her. I did a course online, a mental health course for men, which I found helpful. I didn't feel as alone.

I think what I've noticed the most is my response to other people's news. For example, pregnancy announcements. I can't help but think "ooh you have no idea of what could happen", I'm much more sceptical than I used to be."

What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

"I would like to see more open discussions with dads. Wiser, deeper questions. Delving to get to the root."

What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

"Ask people how they really are. Ask twice. If someone has had a child, remember that the parents are people first.

Children are great but it's so hard.

I would want them to know that it does get easier; kids do become independent eventually."

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood	The realities of parenthood	Your experience
Family-image Busy Excited	Harder Untidy Practical	Sadness Elation Constant

Case Study 6:

“Having a baby was so exhausting that I could hardly function properly.”

“I am 37, I grew up near Shap so proper rural living. My parents split up in my teens. I have always been close to my mum but not so much my dad and sister.

I went to school in Appleby and hated it. Never felt like I fit in. I wasn’t popular and was probably quite nerdy. Very down the middle and blended in as I wasn’t particularly bright or not seen to be particularly struggling. I left school at 16 and tried college but dropped out. Eventually moved to Manchester to do an apprenticeship in highway engineering and ended up living there for 17 years.

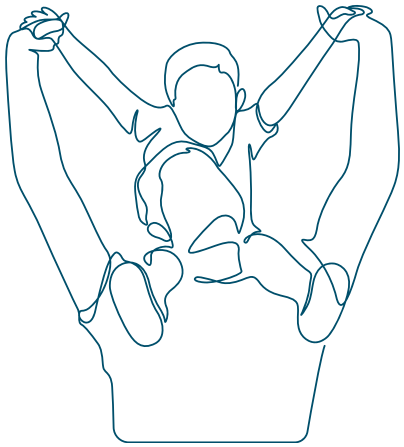
Moved back to Cumbria for a slower pace life, to be around other young families and closer to my friends. I do a lot of running; this is a priority for me and my mental health.

Since having a kid I have realised that my dad was a heavy-handed parent, which I can now see as a direct impact of my own mental health issues and parenting style. I want to be the opposite of him, I’m working really hard to raise the benchmark – the marker can’t just be sh*t. I am finding challenging as it’s hard to change all at once.

Compartmentalisation of my issues doesn’t help either. I’m much more like my mum as she is soft hearted but very matter of fact in her parenting style.”

Paternal experience:

- Decline in your Mental Health following pregnancy
- Relationship changes before, during or following pregnancy
- Other: Post-Natal Depression



How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

"I met my wife 7 years ago and our daughter is now 4 years old. When we found out she was expecting I was happy, it was a planned pregnancy, so I was prepared to become a dad. We had been around friends who had kids, and it was the right time to have a child together. My wife got pregnant quickly.

9 months felt like forever, wife had no issues with pregnancy. There was a time when there were some concerns over reduced movement. That was the first time I felt like it was real and that was when I knew I'd be devastated if she was to lose our baby."

My Story:

"It was a straightforward pregnancy, baby was born a couple of weeks late. Induction at 10 days late, the labour went ok. I felt included and it was all quite calm/relaxed. Baby was born; I realised that the magical life changing glow thing isn't real and all a myth. The first few weeks are just so tiring, and we both felt like sh*t.

I've been on antidepressants since I was 21. I hadn't figured out that it was my wife was what kept me level, stable and the household functioning. Neither of us were able to fully function with such little sleep and without routine. I'd taken for granted how much she was needed; our baby never slept and eventually my wife was diagnosed with post-natal depression. We were so aware of how overwhelmed with felt in this utterly irreversible decision. We both acknowledged that we were completely stuck and out of our depth. The whole experience was so difficult we made our decision early we wouldn't have another child.

I felt so alone in it all. I did try to speak to my friends about it, some people shared links to relevant charities, but it just felt hard to reach out or to step into it.

I remember when the health visitor would visit, I would ask her questions, but she'd answer to my wife which was so frustrating. I was keen to understand how I could help more but it was like she wouldn't entertain me. There should be time made for a separate 5 minute-check in with Dad to ask questions about sleep, feeding – anything! I had to go out my way to have my questions answered."

"There were times I would feel extreme rage towards the baby, but I just had to push through. The dads are also up at night, drained physically and mentally without much support available. Whenever I went to talk about how I was feeling I just got the "imagine how your wife felt" so that would just shut me down.

I think it's dangerous for a child for the dad not to have the adequate and equal mental health support. I have such empathy for those who have harmed children unintentionally due to the sheer exhaustion and pressures that come with parenting.

I now make a point to reach out to other dads and check in on them, especially new dads. Going to groups isn't really for me but I would have been happy to text/call others to share my experience.

My main coping mechanism has always been running; it's a daily commitment. The more exhausted/frazzled I am, the more I need to do it. Thankfully my wife is very supportive of this.

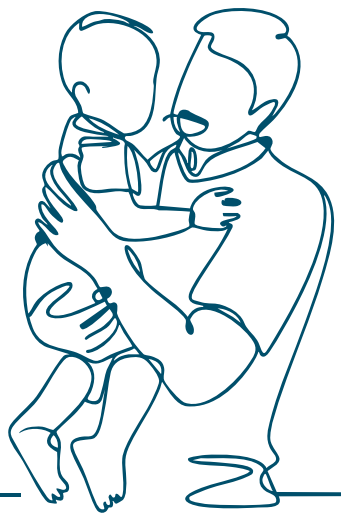
Whilst my wife was really struggling, it was really hard time to balance the care for her, care for the baby and care for myself too. Trying to not make my wife feel like crap or like a failure by doing whatever I could, which meant living parallel lives at times so she could rest. I found that I was often the only dad at the play groups, and I felt like we were a constant disturbance when we were out and about.

There's not much that can do about post-natal depression. I would feel so helpless. It was challenging to navigate my partner being so irrational and just so out of character at times. Some days were really scary. It is so hard to form a strong emotional bond when they are so little, and nobody talks about that real struggle of that."

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

Was there any offer of support from anyone?

"Not even friends or family. I felt so upset and felt so alone during that time. All messages were directed to my wife and baby. Nothing from Health Visitor or professionals."



How has this experience impacted your life?

"I felt like I've got back on track after a year-long dip in my mood. I've always struggled with my mental health, having a baby was so exhausting that I could hardly function properly."

What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

"A text service/online group for dads to be able to speak to other dads. Peer support especially during the night.

Health Visitor to make more effort with dads. A standard GP check in with dads after birth would be wise. "

What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

"If you feel able to, reach out and ask for help/support
Every stage is a phase, it's temporary and things will get better."

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood

Hard
Rewarding
Joyous

The realities of parenthood

Fun
Tiring
Full-on

Your experience

Miserable
Exhausting
Repetitive

Case Study 7: "Dad guilt is real."

"I am 34, from Wigton. I am an only child and would say I have an average working-class background and a fairly normal upbringing. I had a happy and healthy childhood. My parents did split up at age 13. My dad left the family home but stayed local, this changed our situation financially.

I didn't get offered any support from my school. There were no major issues, I think as there weren't any big rebellious outbursts or kicking off, I just got lost under the radar. However, I can now see the impact in my later life.

My lifestyle now is healthy, I enjoy sports, I work full time and have always had good jobs. I had a son last year, I am due to get married soon and move house."

Paternal experience:

- Traumatic Birth experience
- Decline in your Mental Health during or following pregnancy
- Other (please specify): Suspected Miscarriage

How did you feel when you learned you were going to be a Dad?

"Shocked. It came out of the blue. I was equally overjoyed and terrified.

We found out we were pregnant in December 2023, whilst we were in the process of planning a wedding and we were being cautious, so we had assumed it would happen after that. I think we had been made to believe that we might struggle to conceive or that it would take time, so it rally was a big shock to fall pregnant accidentally."

My Story:

"In December 2023, I found out my partner was pregnant, 9 months before our wedding. Initially, I was shocked but also joyful. On Christmas eve of 2023, my partner had a small bleed, which was scary. My initial excitement turned to fear but we were told that this was normal. Christmas morning in A&E, we were reassured this was nothing to worry about. However, this had changed the experience for us, we became quite nervous for the remainder of this trimester.

At this point nobody had directly asked me if I was okay, the focus was mainly on mum.

We paid privately for the 8-week scan for a bit more reassurance but waited for the 12-week scan to learn that there were no issues before we began telling people we were expecting and postponing our upcoming wedding. This made it feel very real. The rest of pregnancy was healthy and uneventful. I was fairly unphased by this stage, I sort of had a "I will do it nearer the time" mindset. My mood was ok, I didn't really get asked whether I was coping with the pregnancy or not at any point, there wasn't much focus on me. However, we both had very little experience to base this on. Me and my partner are both only children, so we have no siblings or nieces or nephews to learn from. I had no way to emotionally prepare for what was coming.

The due date was approaching. I began discussing paternity leave with my employer and colleagues, buying furniture, practical stuff, gifts, etc. 10 days before the birth, I experienced urgent appendicitis which required surgery. A&E on Sunday, Surgery on Monday. It was very tense, and I was fearful of my partner going into labour. Massively anxious about my recovery time for after surgery, I had been signed off work for 2 weeks and reality hit me on how much I needed to be well enough for the baby's arrival. During this time, I was also learning one job and starting a new one, which really added to the stress and pressure I was feeling. I felt like I was spinning plates.

My partner is young, fit and healthy so it was a low-risk pregnancy. There were no issues to begin with, I was in autopilot and mostly recovered from my own surgery.

Initially, labour was typical, in the birth suite, met our midwife and no issues with progression. "

"At 9am, my partner got stuck. The midwife came in to take over. My partners pain and distress were increasing (3-4 hours at 9cm). Time went on and it was getting more intense. Suddenly lights are on, doctors are in, and more assistants come to the room. Monitors turn on and the doctors are talking about heart rate. I could see lots of blood. A sense of it all going wrong. My partner started asking for a c-section, which was to out of character. However, the doctor refused as they felt delivery could be natural.

I was watching this all unfold, like a passenger, just listening, just stuck in the corner.

Observing. Helpless. Lost. Irrelevant.

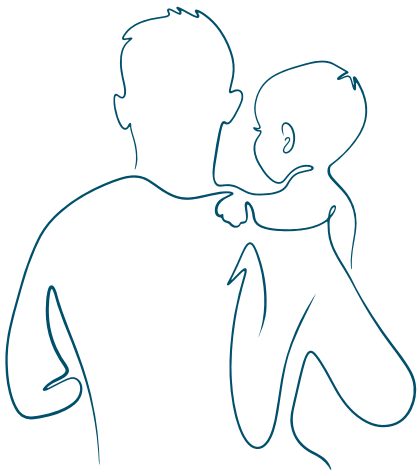
A midwife did ask me if I was ok, I said as long as mum and baby are ok, I will be. Nobody explained to either me or my partner what was going on. I didn't want to leave, I only left if I needed the toilet but I still felt that I wasn't part of the process, like dads are irrelevant. At one point I overheard something that made me think mum and baby were going to die. Nobody spoke to me. It was such an out of body experience, like I was looking through a window.

The midwife and doctor disagreed on the plan of action. They openly discussed this in front of the parents but with no consultation. My partner interrupted and insisted they just decided now. The doctor's manner was poor, they said to mum "if you want a c-section for pain, we're not going to do that," felt very dismissive. The doctor insisted on using forceps and did a good job of the birth.

It was a very traumatic experience.

Once baby was out and partner was stitched up, the room was cleaned but there was still blood everywhere. We were transferred to the next ward and started to call family with the news. It was back and forth over the next day.

Once we got home, due to sick leave, paternity leave and changes of jobs, it meant that I got to have 4 weeks at home with partner and baby. Adjustments to parenthood was difficult without sleep or any kind of routine or order, you just freefall.



My relationship did change, going from partners to parents is hard. Felt like I was in survival mode but generally positive, no major dips."

“At the 3-month mark, I started trying to establish routine with new job, etc. One evening I was getting frustrated and couldn’t settle the baby. My partner had to take over. I said “I’m gonna have a breakdown,” due to lack of sleep, worry and stress. I just wanted ‘one normal night’. I went for a walk to clear my head. This was the first time I had clocked my mood being poor and my partner too.

Unfortunately, this made my partner anxious about leaving me with the baby and that made me reluctant to open up. I didn’t want her to worry. The baby was breastfed, so this led into a fear of not getting it right. I was confident it would be ok, but I just felt I that I wasn’t coping with the nights which I didn’t want to share or increase her anxiety.

A coping mechanism I have and always done is time on my own. This is important to self-regulate but impossible with a new baby in the home. I am aware that this has an impact on my mental health. It is a combination of a new baby, new job and wedding planning.

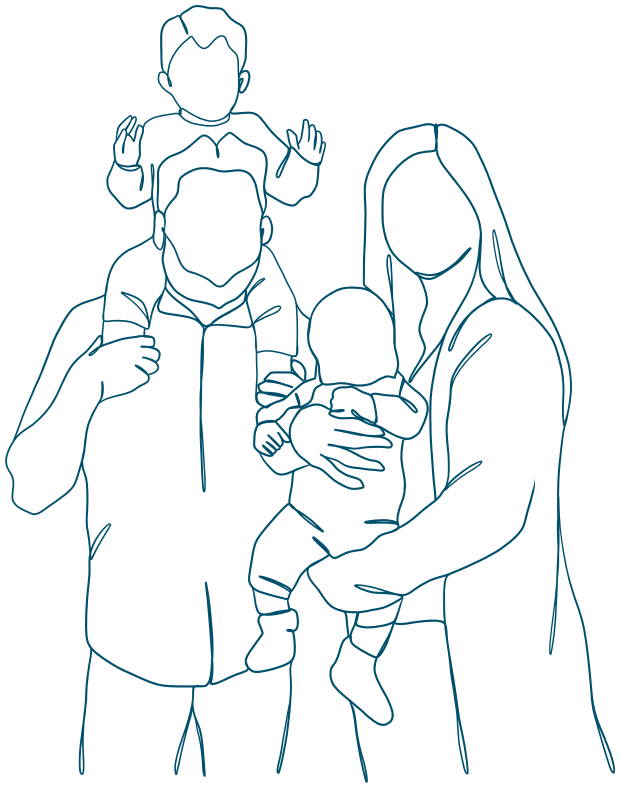
“Its not about me anymore,” then you feel guilty for feeling selfish. Dad guilt is real. The cycle is cruel. I can’t win.“

Did anyone ask you how you were doing?

Was there any offer of support from anyone?

“During the labour the midwife once asked me if I was ok. The only time before, during or after. There was no conversation with the midwife throughout appointments and I wasn’t offered any support.

I attended my partners appointments. Notes at the hospital were very factual and matter of fact. It wasn’t aimed at me, I was there as a support role.”



What would you like to see change regarding the stigma surrounding paternal wellbeing?

"I had no idea there was a stigma until I was in it. Nobody, not even friends or my family have asked. I question why I haven't felt like I can speak to anyone. No professional support either.

It would be great to have more spaces such as "Dad's man club" and more professional acknowledgment."

What advice would you give to someone else in your shoes?

"Seek support and information during pregnancy to attempt to prepare like reading and watching to learn or talk to other dads and if there is a group... attend it! Don't be so naïve.

In hindsight, this is not talked about enough! Being acknowledged is so important to validate."

In 3 words describe...

Your expectation of parenthood

Hard
Lifechanging
Joyous

The realities of parenthood

Incredible
Challenging
Rewarding

Your experience

Terrifying
Exhausting
Relieved

Themes

Through thematic analysis of the case study content, we developed the following themes:

Lack of support from healthcare professionals

“We had a mental health coordinator who was helping us as well as a parental team, but I felt like it was only my partners mental health that was being taken care of which is fine, but I was having struggles too.”

- **This dad also disclosed his previous struggles with addiction and fears of falling back into old habits as a result of his mental health struggles.**
- **A check in from professionals who are around the family in these early stages could be incredibly impactful. However, when made to feel unimportant, it is even more unlikely the father will speak up.**

Further evidence of this theme can be found on pages: 15, 29, 30, 38, 44

Stigma of asking for help / Dad Guilt

“Mum and one friend would check in, but all support is geared to mum and baby. I agree with it but it’s grossly disproportionate. There's 3 people in the mix, not 2. “

“Maybe there could be some support groups for new Dad's. There are things like Andy's men's club and the coffee morning I go to at Workington but nothing specific to being a new Dad, at least not that I know of. If there had been I would definitely have gone.”

“There was no conversation with the midwife throughout appointments and I wasn’t offered any support.”

- **Dad supports mum and baby all throughout the pregnancy. Then has two weeks paternity leave. This changes their lives drastically yet they are to continue to give support without receiving any?**

Further evidence of this theme can be found on pages: 17, 18, 19, 21, 26, 27, 31, 35, 39, 43, 44

Becoming a Dad changes everything

“I wanted to adventure, to travel, without these commitments. It sounds selfish but I just couldn’t see it. I think it was more fear, I didn’t want to let anyone down. I am pleased to say I’ve surprised myself and they’ve changed me, my kids have given me a reason to live. “

“Once baby was born, I watched the relationship with partner and my eldest change. It was so hard. Then the dynamic between my partner and family became complex, I felt like I had to choose between her and them. The home was so intense, constantly walking on eggshells. “

“It changed who I am and how I see the world completely.”

> ***“My relationship did change, going from partners to parents is hard. Felt like I was in survival mode.”***

“Since having a kid I have realised that my dad was a heavy-handed parent, which I can now see as a direct impact of my own mental health issues and parenting style. I want to be the opposite of him, I’m working really hard to raise the benchmark – the marker can’t just be sh*t. I am finding challenging as it’s hard to change all at once. “

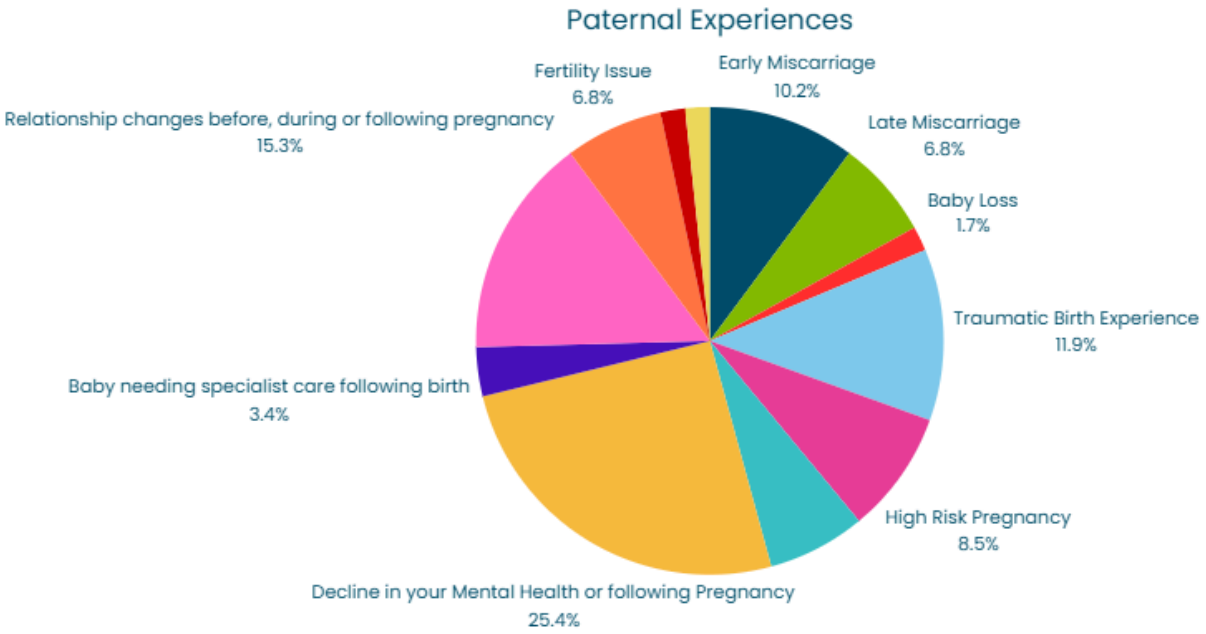
“I understand and appreciate my own mum better because I’m now a parent. You don’t know until you have kids, the realities of the sacrifices made.
The impact has been on my personality, I’m much more private, introverted and withdrawn than before. I have evolved emotionally, more mature.”

- **Depending on each paternal experience, the impact of change when becoming a dad will vary. What doesn’t vary is that a change happens. There are support services for mum and baby with health changes. Where is the support dads who are navigating this life transition?**

Further evidence of this theme can be found on pages: 20, 21, 22, 39, 41 , 42

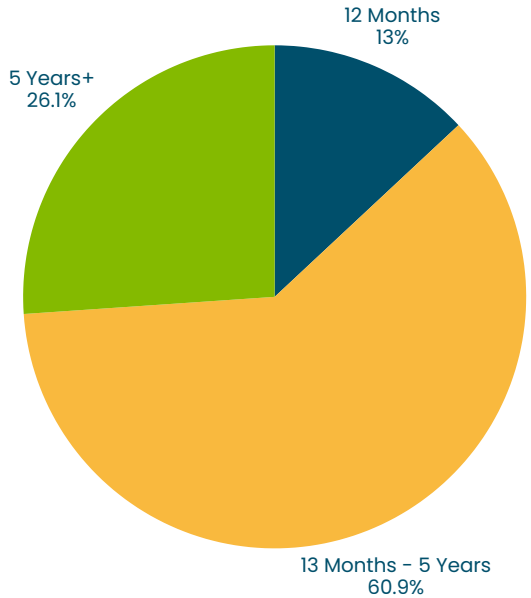
Results Evaluation

Question 1: Have you experienced any of the following during your parenthood journey:



From a sample of 23 responses, 25% experienced a decline in their Mental Health. Despite our small sample size, the impact of becoming a father can have a huge influence on a father's mental wellbeing.

Question 2: Was this event within the last:



*From a sample of 23 responses.

The majority of respondents stated their paternal experiences were within the last 5 years. This data is important as variations in experience may depend on when they happened could explain difficulties.

For instance, Healthcare professional attitudes towards mental health 10 years ago will be drastically difference to present day.

Question's 3 & 4 were related to each other. We wanted to assess self-reported differences in mental health and overall wellbeing.

Question 3: Rate your mental health and wellbeing PRIOR to parenthood:

Answer Choices	Average	Min	Max	Std. Deviation	Response Total
1 (Very Poor) - 5 (Very Good)	3.64	1.00	5.00	1.16	25

Question 4: Rate your mental health and wellbeing TODAY:

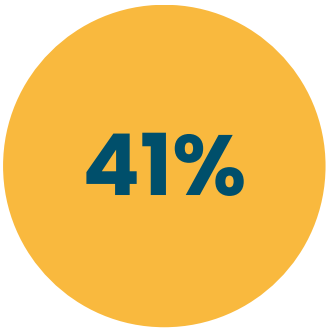
Answer Choices	Average	Min	Max	Std. Deviation	Response Total
1 (Very Poor) - 5 (Very Good)	3.24	1.00	5.00	1.21	25

What does this show?

Firstly, at a first glance you can see that the average response is lower for self-reported mental health and wellbeing **today (Q4)**. This shows that from our sample of 25 men, on average, mental health and wellbeing was reported to be slightly poorer than prior to parenthood. Further emphasising the need for support provision for new fathers.

Secondly, the standard deviation (Std. Deviation in the tables above), is higher for Q4. Standard deviation is simply the variety of responses from the average. The higher value in Question 4 suggests that there was greater variety in how parenthood shaped their mental health and wellbeing today. This is to be expected due to the different experiences each father will have gone through during their parenthood journey. Some will have been straight-forward, some will have experienced loss and trauma causing significant distress.

Question 5: If you ticked 'Decline in Mental Health' in Q1, when did this develop?



Pre-existing Mental Health Issue

Experienced a Mental Health Issue following their parenthood experience

From a sample of 17 responses, it is evident above that a large proportion of men experience a declination in their mental health during parenthood. The severity may depend on if the issue is pre-existing, however this evidence clearly shows that mental health support for fathers is required.

We also gave respondents the opportunity to leave a text response to include 'Any Further Information':

"No support and I really struggled with the loss. Relationship was under stain and eventually broke down."

"Struggled slightly with the strain of being a parent when I hadn't really considered having children before."

"I struggled after both children were born with coping day to day with the demands placed upon me, work, socially, parenting and bills etc."

"The loss of our potential son or daughter sticks with you and doesn't go away. I am beset by a feeling of guilt and helplessness about the situation."

"Struggled with previously undiagnosed depression. First miscarriage hit hard and sought help."

“I’ve suffered with depression since being a teenager. Following the birth of our little girl in 2022 I really struggled.

I felt isolated and that everyone only cared about my wife and daughter and that I was an afterthought. Text messages that said things like “how are mum baby doing?” with no ask of myself really hurt me.

My wife struggled with Post Natal Depression and this in turn meant my main support mechanism was gone.

Compiled with the usual struggles with a new born, sleep deprivation etc, I felt completely broken.”

“I had a dip in the first year of my child being born. (He's 3 now). I put on weight and found myself to be more isolated than I already was. If it wasn't for going to Andy’s Man Club in Whitehaven and forcing myself into a running regime, my score today would have been a lot lower. I have my next baby due in June and I'm concerned I will dip again.”

“Mental health was worst in the first and second month following birth, which slowly improved once a routine formed and got used to this new chapter in life.”

Question 6: Have you had thoughts of ending your life as a result of your experience?

*From a sample of 23 responses

Question 7: Have you been asked how you are doing during your parenthood journey?

*From a sample of 24 responses

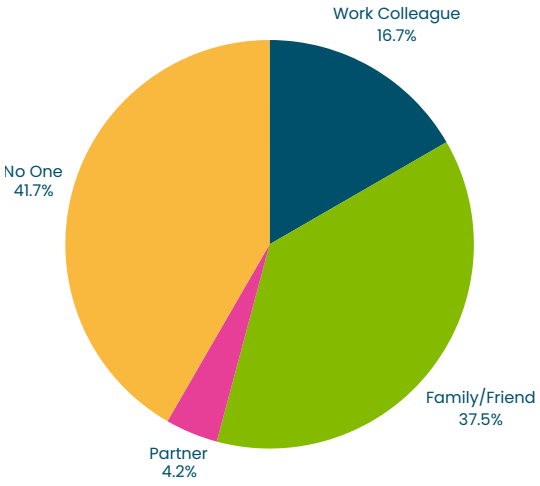
46%

54%

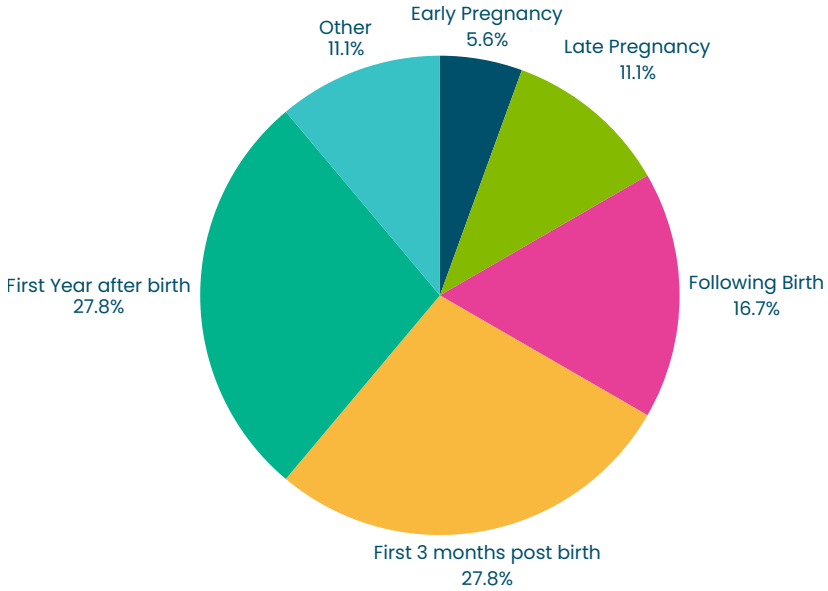
Question 8: Who asked you?

*From a sample of 20 responses

There were no responses from our sample who were asked by a healthcare professional.



Question 9: If so, at what point were you asked?



*From a sample of 11 responses

Following question 9, we wanted to know if new fathers were being offered any support in the rare instances that they were being asked how they were doing.

Question 10: If so, were you offered any support?

What support was offered/signposted to?

"Just general support and advice."

"I looked for support and did the online programme through Cumbria citizens advice. This did help, but would have been better in person. "

"People First"

"Was recommended a counsellor by family member"

Question 11: Which location provided your pregnancy/birth care?

- Cumberland Infirmary Carlisle **48%**
- West Cumberland Hospital Whitehaven **38%**
- Home Birth **5%**
- None **5%**
- Other **19%**

Recommendations and Next Steps

1 The role of Healthcare Professionals recognising and acting on paternal mental health difficulties.

Throughout our case studies and survey findings, a theme emerged of fathers feeling dismissed by healthcare professionals. One was even told “it’s not about you”. Whilst mother and baby need health checks, the father may be experiencing severe mental health issues where they may not have any support system.

It may be suitable for health visiting teams to receive mandatory training on paternal mental health awareness. This initiative would address gaps in recognising and supporting fathers’ mental health needs, improving family wellbeing and reducing stigma.

The programme should be trialed within 12 months, with pre and post figures for mental health services accessed by men being an indicator of success for reduced stigma. A short questionnaire at the end of the health visitors visits could include questions for the paternal experience.

2 Healthwatch Cumberland Phase Two: Paternal Wellbeing continued

As a result of those we have shown interested in the present project, we have decided to develop a second phase of our paternal wellbeing focused project. This will commence in the following months of this report’s publication. We hope to see the present report help to break down the stigma of speaking up about their difficulties and encourage more fathers to share their experiences with us.

Whilst we may review the project model, a case study focus will remain as it is the vulnerability of those brave enough to share, that will help others feel less alone in their paternal experience. Furthermore, we will take further action to reduce stigma and increase awareness through signposting materials.

3 Peer support provision for new dads and those with difficult paternal experiences

As shown below in quotations from our case studies, new dads in our area are in need of a safe space to open up to like-minded people. A space where every person will relate to another in some form, breaking down the perceived criticisms of a struggling new dad.

Instead of primarily looking for support themselves, a new peer support group for dads could be signposted by healthcare professionals. This would bridge the gap in support provision whilst also eliminating the stigma.

As men's mental health is evidently a significant issue in Cumberland (please refer to the introduction of this report), Cumberland Council and North East North Cumbria Integrated Care Board may communicate to offer funding for this such group. We suggest this should be trialed within 12 months as evidently from our project, there is a significant need for support by new dads.

"I couldn't speak to family or friends as I feared that I was being a burden. The criticism, the pressure, the guilt, it was too much. "

"I felt so alone in it all. I did try to speak to my friends about it, some people shared links to relevant charities, but it just felt hard to reach out or to step into it."

"Maybe there could be some support groups for new Dad's. There are things like Andy's men's club and the coffee morning I go to at Workington but nothing specific to being a new Dad, at least not that I know of. If there had been I would definitely have gone."

"Nobody, not even friends or my family have asked. I question why I haven't felt like I can speak to anyone."

4 Integrate father support into the new Family Hubs

A designated space for fathers to seek support is logical to be based within the new Family Hubs. The Cumberland Family Hub webpage features a brilliant range of support options, however lacks person-centered options. A Maternal and Paternal section would provide an area for specific support for the struggles each parent may face.

Drop-ins for dads and themed sessions involving bonding and perinatal transitions would help fill the gap in paternal support. These sessions would also provide a space for peer support.,

Similar to the 'Ask Angela' initiative to help those in bar and restaurant settings, a similar phrase for dads seeking paternal specific support could be developed when attending the family hub. This could assist in reducing anxiety and perceived stigma in men when asking for help.

Implementing this recommendation should be relatively quick due to the demand in Cumberland. With limited resources needed to action, through using existing space and staff, HWC recommend this should be integrated into Family Hubs by the beginning of 2026.

5 Dad Chat - Regular Informal Sessions

Similar to the 'Dad Matters' framework, short informal sessions held alongside antenatal classes or Health Visitor appointments could be held. These tailored sessions could be evening or online to fit within staff capacity and to improve access.

This would involve trained professionals helping fathers navigate paternal difficulties such as their mental health and relationship with their partner. This support would help protect their wellbeing and their families.

6 Awareness materials aimed at fathers and Digital Support options for remote access in rural areas

Leaflets, posters and online materials that explicitly state support for dads/partners about perinatal mental health. These support materials should be distributed via GP surgeries, Hospital and community venues.

Online forums, helplines and WhatsApp groups would be particularly useful for dads in rural parts of Cumberland, single dads who can't attend face-to-face support for lack of childcare and those with tight schedules. These should be included in the awareness materials and on social media.

Healthwatch Cumberland and relevant organisations in Cumberland may co-produce materials as part of our Paternal Wellbeing project Phase Two.

7 Work with Employers

Raise awareness of paternal wellbeing challenges and increase the number of employers allowing flexible working and time off for appointments. Where possible, employers could sponsor or host wellbeing sessions or peer support drop-ins.

Workplaces to create supportive culture and normalise conversation. This can be done by leaders and managers sharing their own struggles if comfortable doing so, as this will create empathy and show that it is okay to need support at challenging times.

Encourage open communications channels where dads feel comfortable discussing their mental health challenges without stigma.

Actively recognise and support working dads by creating a culture that views paternity leave and family roles as a positive part of an employees career.

8 Sports Team Support Sessions

Support groups in the form of weekly/biweekly sessions combining peer support conversation time with game time. This could be adapted to any sports team across Cumberland e.g. Rugby, Football etc.

This would provide a new community-focused supportive environment away from the tradition support group model. For men, the idea of a chat whilst playing a game of rugby may appeal more to help their wellbeing than other options due to perceived stigma of talking about mental health.

A successful example of this is Honeysuckle FC which has been created in conjunction with Liverpool FC. Healthwatch Cumberland have put together a proposal based on a similar format that will be made available to interested parties.

For example, any of these clubs could get involved:

Honeysuckle FC for Baby Loss Awareness Week 2023, Liverpool FC Website

Recommendation	Suggested Timescale	Responsibility	Actioned
1) The role of Healthcare Professionals	12 Months	NCIC GP Surgeries	
2) HWC Phase Two: Paternal Wellbeing continued	October - December 2025	Healthwatch Cumberland	
3) Peer support provision for new dads	12 Months	Healthwatch Cumberland and Cumberland Council	
4) Integrate father support into the new Family Hubs	Early 2026	Cumberland Council	
5) 'Dad Chat'	12 Months	Cumberland Council & NCIC	
6) Awareness Materials and Digital Support Provision	Early 2026	Healthwatch Cumberland and NHS	
7) Work with Employers	October - December 2025	Healthwatch Cumberland, Local Employers	
8) Sports Team Support	Early 2026	Healthwatch Cumberland, Local Sports Teams, Cumberland Council	

Support Resources

Advice, tips and organisations:

Pandas Foundation
Support for parents and carers including support groups
https://pandasfoundation.org.uk/how-we-can-support-you/support-for-dads/

Tommy's
Looking after your mental health as a new dad
Baby loss information and support
Pregnancy for dads and partners
https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/dads-and-partners/looking-after-your-mental-health-after-baby-born

The DadPad
NHS guide for new dads
https://thedadpad.co.uk/

CBeebies Parenting tips
https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/articles/zb7svk7

Cumberland Council
https://www.cumberland.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/children-and-families/early-help-support-families/find-advice-and-support-services-families-and-children/parenting-support#:~:text=young%20parents%20whose%20children%20are,Family%20Line%20website

Groups and support networks:

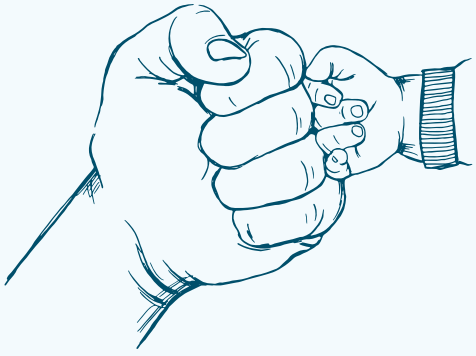
Andy's Man Club
https://andysmanclub.co.uk/

Dads Offload Cumbria
Peer support group for dads at all stages of fatherhood. Email: offloadcumbria@outlook.com
https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/eLibrary/Content/Internet/537/6683/6687/17362/44861153052.pdf

Dadsnet
https://dadsnet.com/

Dope Black Dads
https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/may/20/dope-black-dads-dispelling-myths-and-biases-about-black-fathers-a-photo-essay

Facebook group
Instagram: @dopeblackdads
Podcast:
https://open.spotify.com/show/3clh6ejnk3lUUVhqSKzPUS?si=a41cf046cf624f57



Mental health & Family Support:

Carlisle Eden Mind
https://cemind.org/

Every Life Matters
https://www.every-life-matters.org.uk/

Cumbria Family Hubs
https://cumberlandfamilyhubs.org.uk/find-family-hub

Samaritans
Call 116 123 or email: jo@samaritans.org
https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/

Campaign Against Living Miserably
https://www.thecalmzone.net/

If anything in this report caused distress or you would like to give feedback, visit https://healthwatchcumberland.co.uk/ for our contact details.

References

Ellis, J., & Wier, J. (2024). The psychological impact of birth trauma on fathers: a narrative review. British Journal of Midwifery, 33(1), 22–31. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjom.2024.0052

Fisher S. D. (2016). Paternal Mental Health: Why Is It Relevant?. American journal of lifestyle medicine, 11(3), 200–211. https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827616629895

Glover V. (2020). Prenatal mental health and the effects of stress on the foetus and the child. Should psychiatrists look beyond mental disorders?. World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA), 19(3), 331–332. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20777

Goodman J. H. (2004). Paternal postpartum depression, its relationship to maternal postpartum depression, and implications for family health. Journal of advanced nursing, 45(1), 26–35. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02857.x

Hambidge, S., Cowell, A., Arden-Close, E. et al. (2021) "What kind of man gets depressed after having a baby?" Fathers' experiences of mental health during the perinatal period. BMC Pregnancy Childbirth 21, 463

Paulson, J. F., & Bazemore, S. D. (2010). Prenatal and postpartum depression in fathers and its association with maternal depression: a meta-analysis. JAMA, 303(19), 1961–1969. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.605

Ramchandani, P., & Psychogiou, L. (2009). Paternal psychiatric disorders and children's psychosocial development. Lancet (London, England), 374(9690), 646–653. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60238-5

Shapiro, A.F. and Gottman, J.M., 2005. Effects on Marriage of a Psycho-Communicative-Educational Intervention With Couples Undergoing the Transition to Parenthood, Evaluation at 1-Year Post Intervention. Journal of Family Communication 5, 1–24.

Thorpe, K. J., Dragonas, T., & Golding, J. (1992). The effects of psychosocial factors on the mother's emotional well-being during early parenthood: A cross-cultural study of britain and greece. Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, 10(4), 205–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/02646839208403954

healthwatch
Cumberland

Healthwatch Cumberland
The People First Conference Centre
Milbourne Street
CA2 5XB

t: 0300 303 8567
e: info@healthwatchcumberland.co.uk

healthwatchcumberland.co.uk