

## Dads Accessing Mental Health Support in the Perinatal Phase Interview with Rickie Elliot, Clinical Psychologist, Soar Psychology Centre

### Summary

*Clinical psychologist Dr. Rickie Elliot discusses the mental health challenges faced by new parents during the perinatal period (pregnancy and postpartum). She highlights the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in this population and emphasises the importance of early intervention and support.*

*Dr. Elliot stresses the significant role fathers play in their partners' mental well-being, noting the benefits of open communication, seeking professional help, and utilising resources like SMS4dads. Finally, she emphasises that recovery is possible with appropriate support and treatment.*

My name is Dr Ricky Elliot. I'm a clinical psychologist and I've been practising for 20 years now. I work in private practice currently, after working in the range of health services across NSW Health.

My main special interest that I like to work in is in perinatal mental health – so working with pregnant mums and dads and in the postnatal period, helping support their mental health, anxiety, depression, adjustment, problems attaching and bonding with their new baby. I also do a lot of work in the perinatal loss space when people lose babies.

Day-to-day I mostly see mums – I think that new mums still probably are more likely to attend psychology appointments than dads. However, often with the encouragement of their partner, dads will attend. So, I do see a lot of dads – but I'd say most mostly women.

The best referrals we get are when people are experiencing struggles in pregnancy because we can do a lot to support and prevent postnatal mental health. So, we'll see lots of women in pregnancy but also parents seeking support in the postnatal period.

The most common reason people seek psychological support is for anxiety and depression – it's really common – antenatally and postnatally. Often the new mums like their partners to attend, to have some understanding from a psychologist, to

educate their partner about what they're going through. Because a lot of the time their partners are confused and overwhelmed and don't know how to support their partner.

Especially in the postnatal period, having a new baby puts significant stress on the couple. There's a lot of adjustment issues that happen then. Counselling can support the new couple navigating that adjustment to a baby. When mum is experiencing mental health problems and dad attends, that helps the dads to really understand what's happening for their partner and how to help support. A lot of dads want to fix what's going on. And then a lot of mums find that a bit dismissive of their emotions. So, helping them navigate how to support their partner during that period is important. Also, if mum experiences postnatal anxiety or depression, 50% of those partners will also experience it themselves. So, the dads will often have anxiety and depression if their partner is struggling.

Even if their partner is not struggling 1 in 10 dads will struggle themselves. So it can open up the conversation for how the partners (the dad) is coping and finding out whether he needs support. So it gives a little invitation, an encouragement into that so it's really beneficial.

## **WHAT'S NORMAL & WHAT'S NOT?**

Some signs to look out for if you are worried about post-natal depression

It's really normal to have what we call "Baby Blues" postnatally, which lasts for a few days and it's nothing to be too concerned about. But when your partner seems down, tearful, sad, hopeless... They're feeling very negative and critical of themselves. They might have poor sleep or concentration for a period of two weeks or more – for most of the day, nearly every day – that's a sign to talk to them about what's happening.

Sometimes it doesn't look like depression or anxiety. Sometimes it looks like anger and irritability. It sometimes can present that way as well.

## **HOW CAN DADS SUPPORT THEIR PARTNERS?**

### **COMMUNICATE & LISTEN**

Communicating and really listening and really just being there with them.

A lot of dads with beautiful intentions try to jump in and fix it for the partner and tell them what to do or they don't understand it. So, it's just really teaching them to listen and communicate well.

## **SEEK SUPPORT**

Encourage the partner to seek help and support,

## **GIVE POSITIVE ENCOURAGEMENT**

Give positive encouragement to their partner

## **CHECK IN ON YOURSELF**

And also checking in with themselves on how they're coping is important as well.

I always give the SMS4dads resources out to new parents in pregnancy and postnatally. I find that SMS4dads is a really easy, non-confrontational way for dads to seek support – without stigma, without cost. It's a really great service.

*INTERVIEWER: For dads receiving messages up to three times a week about their baby's development, about looking after their own health and checking in on the well-being of their partner, how do you think this messaging can trickle down and make a difference?*

I think that the text messages that dads receive from SMS4dads is very important.

Because a lot of new dads can feel excluded – like they're on the outer and feel that what is happening is between mum and baby. They may not be sure of their role or input. So, giving them information and education about their baby's development – it really helps dads feel involved. It's also a conversation starter between mums and dads. A lot of the time dads will go to their partner and talk about things that maybe they wouldn't normally have done. And it really causes dads to reflect on self-care and how they are doing because a lot of the time they are not asked and the focus is on the mum. So, it is good in so many ways!

The feedback about SMS4dads from mums is that the dads are starting conversations more – about her mental health, asking more questions, and also starting conversations about baby development and things as well. So, it definitely helps with communication and starts conversations that we want to be happening in the house all which is so preventative for mental health.

## **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES DADS FACE IN SUPPORTING THEIR PARTNERS?**

I think sometimes dads are not sure what to look for, not sure what to be aware of. They're not sure if bringing it up – this is a big issue – they are not sure if bringing it up with their partners going to make it worse.

So a lot of the time they think that by avoiding it, you know it's not going to escalate the situation. They don't want to seem critical. They don't want to upset their partner anymore, so they avoid conversations.

I feel like the process of coming to see me or seeing a GP is a tricky one. There is still stigma I think for a lot of people about it. They think it means that they're not coping or it's a sign of weakness or whatnot. But once they are through the door, that all disappears and they benefit so much from it. And I think the same with SMS4dads. At first they might be a bit hesitant, but once they start receiving the messages they greatly appreciate it and are more involved and then even become an advocate to spread the word about it.

### **How beneficial is it for men to speak to their male friends about mental health?**

I think it's so beneficial for themselves to have that support and to seek that advice from other people. But it's also so important then for those friends. To be able to then have permission to have those conversations themselves. So, the more we talk about mental health and well-being, the more the stigma is decreased, and the more everyone's more open and comfortable to seek support.

There has been a shift which has been fabulous over the last 20 years. So many more people are open to seeking help and support earlier now. Research says that still 50% of people are reluctant to seek help and support, but that figure used to be drastically higher. And in a few years time that figure will hopefully, and could be drastically lower. The earlier people seek support, the greater their outcomes are. So, we've definitely seen a lot of improvement in that.

Referrals for me for people in pregnancy – whether from their health professional, their GP or their obstetrician, who has identified potential risk of possibly developing postnatal anxiety or depression because there are a few risk factors identified in pregnancy – that never used to happen. And that means we do have so much more capacity to support and prevent the development of postnatal depression and anxiety in the postpartum period. So that's been a great improvement.

It is so incredibly difficult for new dads who have a partner struggling with depression or anxiety. They often feel helpless and overwhelmed and they are not sure how to support their partner or how to communicate about it with their partner. They can often feel guilty about leaving their partner to go back to work... So they can be anxious and feel helpless. So that can be incredibly difficult for them.

I would love dads who are experiencing this to know, that this is, even though it's not discussed that often, it is a really common experience. I want dads to know they are not alone and that the mum struggling in the postnatal period is unfortunately really common and is sometimes a normal part of the adjustment. Dads aren't

alone and they can seek support and access services like SMS4dads, talk to their GP about it, and seek support.

Some clients get concerned that it's a never-ending thing and they can experience a feeling of hopelessness around that. So, what I'd like to say to those parents is with treatment, medication sometimes, counselling, seeking social support... with those kinds of treatment it can resolve quite quickly – and it doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to happen in subsequent pregnancies either.

So, the earlier they seek help the better. If you have concerns, straight away talk to your GP as the first port of call. Seek support with services from someone like myself and access IT services like SMS4dads to support the whole family unit. By getting support recovery is definitely possible really quickly.

Dads have a significant impact on the mental health of their partner. And the quality of the relationship can be one risk factor in developing postnatal depression or anxiety. So, if the partners are emotionally supportive of each other, it's a hugely protective factor for both of them. And the more the partners communicate about their emotions and their well-being and how they're travelling, the more likely you are to prevent postnatal depression and anxiety or if it's to come on, to recover more quickly.