



Becoming a dad is a life-changing event, but it's also a challenging one too. As you scramble to adjust to your new life, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Newborns require round-the-clock attention, sleep deprivation can hit you hard, while the financial strain of endless baby supplies can mount up fast. It's therefore not surprising that research shows that up to 1 in 10 new dads will experience perinatal depression and anxiety.

But you can take action to ease the pressure and make the early stages of fatherhood less stressful. Use these tips to cope with the craziness and make your family life more fulfilling.

1. BUILD YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

They say it takes a village to raise a child for a reason – you don't have to go it alone. "Ask yourself the question, who can you call on to actually get some help?" says Dr Sarah Robuck, Gidget Foundation Australia Clinical Psychologist.

Seek out family and friends who can offer practical support and moral encouragement. Talk to dads at work about how they coped with the juggling act of becoming a dad.

"Everything is transient at this stage," Dr Robuck says. "What you need in those first six weeks is very different to what you'll need for a one-year-old or a four-year-old. So keeping those open lines of communication around you is really important."

2. PRIORITISE SOME "ME-TIME"

Before kids, your personal form of stress-release may have been exercise or catching up with your mates for a drink. As a dad, those opportunities are suddenly limited. "All of the outlets you might've had for de-stressing tend to go, because your time becomes such a precious commodity," Dr Robuck says.

Yes, parenthood involves a lot of sacrifice as you make time to care for your family. But you also need to decompress and, if you manage to do this, you won't just feel better, you may even show up as a more engaged and attentive dad. "You can't look after anybody else in your family if you're not looking after yourself," Dr Robuck says.

3. SET YOUR BOUNDARIES

Managing the competing demands of work and family can often feel like mission impossible. Trying to stay hyper-vigilant on every front is a recipe for burnout. "Sometimes it's about being able to set boundaries for yourself," Dr Robuck says.

Consider letting your team at work know that you won't be checking email after, say, 6pm. "Similarly, talk to your partner and say: 'When I'm at work, if it's urgent call me twice. If it's not urgent, just send me a text and I'll respond to it as soon as I can'," Dr Robuck advises. "Setting these sorts of boundaries can help to reduce your mental load."

4. MAINTAIN YOUR CONNECTION

The arrival of a baby changes the dynamic of your relationship overnight. As a new dad, it's common to feel somewhat replaced in your partner's affections. Not only is she totally exhausted, but all her remaining energy is devoted to your child. "Transitioning into parenthood is difficult," Dr Robuck says. "Remember this is a temporary period – be kind with yourself and be kind with your partner."

In those early months after childbirth, couples are unlikely to enjoy much (if any) sex. But Dr Robuck recommends still trying to spend quality time together – even if it's just 10 minutes a day – and working to keep your physical connection alive. "Think about what other ways there are to maintain some form of intimacy whether it's holding hands or just hugging while watching Netflix," she says.

5. PLAY THE LONG GAME

In those early weeks, many dads worry if they're not immediately gripped with an overwhelming love for their baby. Don't panic – this is totally natural. "Any form of connection with the baby is going to take time," Dr Robuck insists. Often dads are forced to return to work soon after their child is born, so they don't get the same daily exposure to the baby that builds up the bond. But that connection will develop if you give it a chance. Regular interaction, cuddles and play will soon foster a deeper connection with your baby "That attachment may not be instantaneous but it will happen," Dr Robuck says. ●

