

New dads can find it hard to access support. This is where other fathers meet mates to talk to

ABC Life / By Grace Jennings-Edquist

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IMAGE: Joel Olsen, pictured here with his daughter, is one of three Aussie dads who shared his tips on how to find support in new parenthood. (Supplied: Beck Rocchi)

When Daniel Stray's first child was born, he was keen to connect with other new dads and chat about what he was going through.

"My partner benefited a lot from her mothers' group," he says. "They caught up regularly and once I went back to work I felt a little bit out of the loop. I thought, 'how do I engage in something similar?'"

But the restaurateur found "there wasn't a lot about for new dads who are quite proactive about doing things with their kids".

His solution? Team up with fellow dad Matt Grant, who he met in a local cafe, to form Dads Pram Club, an informal meetup in their local area that gives dads a chance to swap notes and share advice.

They usually do so over a beer, which is "an easy icebreaker to get dads talking", Daniel says. "As men, we're notoriously bad at talking about anything."



IMAGE: Matt Grant (left) and Daniel Stray, pictured here with their baby daughter and son respectively, are founders of an informal meetup for Melbourne dads called Dads Pram Club. (Supplied)

Access to crucial perinatal support services for new mums is improving, and experts say it's also important that new dads are aware of existing practical and emotional support to deal with the challenges of becoming a parent — from sleep problems to changing relationship roles, to navigating work-life balance.

But they say dads are less likely to seek help for those issues than mums, and many men aren't even aware that challenges such as perinatal depression can affect them.

ABC Life asked three Aussie fathers where they found the support they needed, and what advice they'd give other first-time dads and dads-to-

be.

Parents' groups aren't just for mums

Musician and part-time stay-at-home dad Brett Lee lives in Melbourne. His extended family is based in New South Wales, so when Brett became a father 17 months ago, he wasn't sure who to turn to for advice or help with childcare.



IMAGE: Melbourne dad Brett Lee, 33, turns to other dads he met through the community parents' group when he needs fathering advice or support. (Tim Grey)

It was through the parents' group run by the community maternal child health nurse that he met other dads, who have now become a support network.

While such council-run meet-ups are often thought of as "mother's groups", he recommends new dads go along and see if they connect with fellow parents.

"The dads, 18 months on, are all really close," he says.

"You just get pulled into things with your kid more often, and you'll feel a lot more connected to the process and everything that's going on."

Brett now meets the other dads to take their daughters to swimming lessons on Sundays and to the football. They can talk through anything

from teething and advice on new kid-friendly parks, to some of the deeper stuff.

When challenges arise, "sometimes it can feel, as a dad, like, what am I doing wrong? But when you talk to the other dads it's nice to hear they're going through the same thing," he says.

"We're definitely helping each other emotionally. And because we're so close, it's kind of not as confronting as a man to talk about your emotions when you know someone well."

Other ways to find 'dad friends'

If your parents' group hasn't yielded many dad friendships, there are plenty of other places you can find a new support network.

For Joel Olsen, who moved with his wife and young daughter to NSW's Northern Rivers region last year, making new parent friends in the area has been as simple as striking up conversations with families he sees out and about.

"You're at the park, you're at the beach and your kid walks over to another kid and you just start chatting to the dad," says Joel, who owns myotherapy clinics in NSW and Victoria.

"I've probably made two or three dad mates in the last few months since being here [by asking them], 'Want to go to the bakery and have a coffee?' or something like that."

You can of course also [meet fellow fathers](#) at community groups or any religious groups you might be involved in, through birth classes, or simply by striking up conversations with workmates or neighbours who have recently had a baby (and who you may recognise from dead-of-night walks with a pram).

The not-for-profit organisation Dads Group also has a great searchable database of local dad meetups. It's a tip we were given from Terri Smith, chief executive officer of Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA).

Dads Group has more than 3,500 members in 100 groups across the country; that includes chapters in major cities as well as in regional areas including Mildura, Albury Wodonga, and Mt Coolum.

Social media can help

Needless to say, social media is a great way to connect with others in similar circumstances.

Brett is a member of a stay-at-home dads' group on Facebook, which is also where Dads Pram Club arranges its meetups.

Meanwhile, the Reddit forum Daddit is jam-packed with dads wanting to share their experiences with other fathers — from asking questions about how to support a son who has come out as gay, to men sharing tips on how to cut down on work hours or bond with their new baby.

Social media forums for parents are convenient ways to find inspiration, advice or a sympathetic ear on all things parenting-related, Brett says.

He also uses Facebook groups to find inspiration on parks, pools and other kid-friendly outings.

"You can often chuck a question out there and people are happy to answer it."

Some dads are also drawn to social media's more anonymous forums to discuss sensitive issues such as divorce and child custody conflicts, [research shows](#).

Keeping an eye on your mental health

It's pretty normal for new parents to feel overwhelmed and exhausted after welcoming a new child into the world. After all, "it's a big time of change, a big time of transition," says Grant Blashki, lead clinical adviser at Beyond Blue.

"There's lots of attention on the mum, and often the dads are feeling a lot of pressure."

While many parents find new parenthood gets easier with time ("depending how settled the baby is, it's going to get about 50 per cent easier every six weeks, Dr Blashki says), it's also possible for new dads or dads-to-be to develop perinatal depression or anxiety.

Symptoms of depression to look out for include:

If you or anyone you know needs help:

[Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14

[beyondblue](#) on 1300 224 636

[MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978

Low mood

Often feeling close to tears

Feeling sad, numb and empty

Feelings of hopelessness, with no interest in the baby or other things you used to enjoy

Decreased energy

Having trouble thinking clearly and lack of memory or concentration

Beyond Blue says signs of anxiety symptoms include:

Recurring worries that are difficult to stop or control

Constantly feeling irritable, restless or on edge

Tense muscles

A tight chest and heart palpitations

Outbursts of panic or constant worries or fear about the health of your baby

"If you're concerned about how you're feeling, you can make an appointment with your GP and get a mental health plan that can subsidise mental health care" for up to 10 sessions a year, says Ms Smith from PANDA.

If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program, it's a good idea to arrange free and confidential counselling through that service, she adds.

You might also find it helpful to take Beyond Blue's [stress test](#) for dads

[PANDA](#) (Perinatal Depression and Anxiety Australia) on 1300 726 306

[Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467

[Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890

[QLife](#) on 1800 184 527

What you should know about new dads and mental health

Almost half of all new dads aren't even aware that a condition such as postnatal depression can affect new dads — but it's actually quite common.

[One in 10 dads](#) experiences depression during pregnancy or in the year after birth. Anxiety conditions affect one in six dads during the pregnancy, and one in five in the postnatal period.

Dads can also get the "baby blues", according to [MensLine](#) Australia., and male partners can experience significant hormonal changes after welcoming a new child.

or PANDA's [checklist](#) for expecting and new dads to help work out how you're coping.

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Reaching out for help

Some dads struggle to acknowledge or talk about mental health challenges they're experiencing "because they often feel pressure to be the 'rock'," says Ms Smith.

"We also know traditionally men aren't often great at reaching out for help."

IMAGE: Joel and his daughter, now 18 months old, hit the beach. (*Supplied: Beck Rocchi*)

But opening up to your support networks (and the professionals) is an important part of recovery, as Joel found. A few months after his daughter's birth, when she was experiencing a period of constant ear infections, he found himself feeling exhausted, snappy and teary.

"I was feeling tired and feeling a bit disconnected," he says.

"I was walking around the house a bit aimlessly, I was just getting a bit frustrated with [my baby] over nothing ... I felt that sense of not allowing myself to be vulnerable."

Ultimately, being able to name his experience as depression allowed him to reach out for help from a friend who is a psychologist and hypnotherapist.

"It helped with that reassurance that different relationships with dads and kids develop at different stages," he says.

He also found [regular meditation](#) helpful in his recovery, and once his daughter started sleeping more regularly, he made time to start surfing — a passion that helps him feel refreshed and grounded, but that he had stopped after her birth.

These days, Joel openly talks about the challenges of being a dad, and wants other fathers to know it's OK to talk about those struggles.

"I'm quite open to admitting that I had some really dark times, so it doesn't get pushed under the rug so that when others are going through it they don't think, 'I can't actually approach Joel because he just said it was easy'."

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