

FRIDAY, June 8 (HealthDay News) -- Postpartum depression has gotten a softer face in recent years as celebrity mothers, such as Brooke Shields, who've experienced its devastating symptoms, have begun to share their personal stories.

Still hidden, though, are the identities of new fathers who have suffered in silence all these years.

Almost as many men as women suffer from this type of depression, according to researchers who examined data from more than 5,000 two-parent families. In all, about 14 percent of mothers and 10 percent of fathers showed signs of moderate or severe postpartum depression, according to the study, first reported in the August 2006 issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

"The long-standing belief of many people, including physicians, has been that postpartum depression is due to hormone changes in women that take place after childbirth," said study leader James F. Paulson, an assistant professor of pediatrics, behavioral research and community health at Eastern Virginia Medical School's Center for Pediatric Research in Norfolk. "Obviously, fathers wouldn't be susceptible to changes of this nature and, probably because of this, haven't been a focus of study."

Janice Goodman, a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist and assistant professor at the MGH Institute of Health Professions, an affiliate of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, agrees that hormonal changes aren't the only plausible explanation.

"In both men and women, the huge life changes that go along with having a baby can contribute to depression," she said.

Postpartum depression can begin anytime after childbirth and can last up to a year, according to Mental Health America, formerly the National Mental Health Association. Symptoms often mirror those of any clinical depression, such as sadness, fatigue and hopelessness. A sufferer may experience drastic changes in mood and appetite, excessive preoccupation with a child's health, or intrusive thoughts of harming the baby.

While research suggests that hormonal changes may contribute to the onset of postpartum depression in women, "no definitive hormonal cause" has been identified, Paulson pointed out. Other factors suspected to play a role include history of depression, fatigue, marital discord, social support and financial support.

"Factors of this nature certainly can affect fathers, and they probably do in many families," he added.

For the study, parents completed questionnaires and were interviewed to determine whether they showed symptoms of depression. Researchers also probed parent-child interactions, such as reading, telling stories, and singing songs -- acts considered critically important for positive child development.

Depression in either parent was associated with reduced interaction, Paulson noted, and "fathers with greater levels of depression interacted with their child less."

Goodman said the research highlights a link between maternal and paternal postpartum depression (PPD), "such that men whose partners are distressed are at significantly higher risk of experiencing PPD themselves."

Yet postpartum paternal depression typically isn't on clinicians' radar, she conceded, and men often have less contact with health-care providers than women do.

However reluctant they may be to seek help, it's important for new dads who are experiencing symptoms of depression to see their primary-care provider or a mental-health specialist for evaluation and treatment, Goodman said.

"One important implication for clinicians is, if a woman is identified as depressed during the postpartum period, to ask the father how he's doing and to screen for depression in him," she added.

More information

Visit Mental Health America for more on [postpartum depression](#).

SOURCES: James F. Paulson, Ph.D., assistant professor of pediatrics, behavioral research and community health, Center for Pediatric Research, Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk; Janice Goodman, Ph.D., APRN, BC, psychiatric clinical nurse specialist and assistant professor, MGH Institute of Health Professions, Boston; Mental Health America, Alexandria, Va.; August 2006, Pediatrics