

Coping with Undiagnosed Paternal Depression in the Family

My name is John; I am married to Nani and have three children. I completed high school at sixteen and went on to graduate from Chemical Engineering at Monash University with honours in 1991. I began work in the paper industry and I married Nani at the age of twenty-three. My professional success led to a company offering me a job in Tasmania, which I accepted.

Having been a committed Christian since university, I was asked to be on staff at a church in Devonport. I was the associate pastor for a few years and became the senior pastor around 2005. Church services grew to four locations in Northern Tasmania with approximately 700 person-visits per week.

My parents divorced when I was ten years of age, and my mother identifies as being a victim of domestic violence of which I have no recollection. My grandmother died when I was young and there was talk in the family of some mental problems but it was not something that appeared to have affected any of her children. I don't have any close relatives who have been diagnosed with mental illness to my knowledge.

In terms of physical health, being married, being spiritual, lots of friends, financially secure, low stress semi rural environment, accomplished career, I certainly had far more protective factors than predisposing ones.

However, in 2007 when I was 37 years old, I began to become overwhelmed. I had been married to Nani for 14 years at this stage and our three children were 7, 5 and 3 years old. The onset of signs and symptoms were so glacial I was like a frog in a saucepan and I got boiled before I realised it was getting too hot. Between the pressure of home life and work, I developed sleep problems (nightmares and night sweats), getting out of bed became too hard, there was anxiety developing around work, I was avoiding meetings, and deadlines. I couldn't face budgets, return phone calls or answer emails. My emotions were predominately anger, irritation and frustration. I was intimidating toward my wife - my behaviour frightened her at times.

I just couldn't stop working. I thought that if I worked harder things would eventually get better. I told myself it was just a phase. My decision making and cognitive functioning eventually slowed down so much I had trouble comprehending conversations and counting out change from my wallet. I had no energy. I blamed my situation and thought my symptoms were situational.

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When I was at my worst, my relationship with my wife consisted of stonewalling and avoidance punctuated with conflict. I would get so angry I couldn't stop the rage; I would literally see red. On one occasion we were on holidays and the only thing I said to Nani for the whole week was "pass the salt". I remember avoiding eye contact; I went through a stage of wearing cap and sunglasses inside so she couldn't "see" me. The smallest thing could cause a conflict.

Nani felt that I was essentially an absent dad. She felt that I only cared about work and that I was obsessed with leadership demands – at her and the kids' expense. She felt she was effectively a single parent. My parental interaction was limited. I avoided the kids by getting up after they'd left, and getting home late at night. I tried to stay in bed on weekends. They were too much for me. Too many words; too boisterous; too active; too demanding.

I escaped to the workplace. I slept behind my desk and ate baked beans out of a can. I had over a thousand emails in my inbox. I worked day and night; had no boundaries. I worked on my smartphone. I worked in my head while I lay in bed, dreading sleep. I thought I could just harden up and stick it out. But productivity at work continued to decline, and I developed a sense of foreboding and impending danger on top of the constant conflict at home.

There was one point where my nine year old son said he wanted to die. He was our eldest so I assume he had most awareness of the conflict at home. The whole street could probably hear Nani and me fighting. We fought viciously in the car with the kids in the back seat until they cried out for us to stop, which we did but an aura of hostility enveloped us even in our silence.

The children expressed fears of us divorcing, and we couldn't in all honesty give them any assurances that we would be together in the future, but we did assure them that we loved them.

It never crossed my mind, that what I was experiencing was a health issue. My sense of masculinity and ego made me 'tough it out' rather than accept or seek assistance and I became suicidal. I wanted to die to solve everyone's problems. Suicide seemed the best solution. I was googling asphyxiation and I imagined/fantasised about myself hanging - this was my default position when distressed.

I was afraid that I wouldn't get better. I was afraid that this was all life was now. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to work again. I felt guilt over what I was putting my family through.

I remember having a light bulb moment when I was looking up information on suicide and thinking "normal people don't do this – this isn't normal". It was at that point that the thought entered my mind that something was wrong. I jumped onto beyondblue's website and took the short survey and sure enough, all the signs and symptoms were present.

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There was some relief in knowing what was wrong with me.

But even when I realised I had depression via a beyondblue self test, I still thought I could just get better without seeking treatment. After trying to work harder and not making any progress, I did cut back on work, and started to create a third space in my life between work and home. I started fly fishing and I bought a motorbike. I began analysing myself and working more to my strengths. I started identifying areas and situations that caused stress and acknowledged these with my employees and asked for their help.

Eventually, I followed the beyondblue recommendation and saw a GP but still didn't fill the script for months until things kept getting worse. When I did fill the script, the chemist looked like she'd just graduated from pharmacology and it eroded what little sense of self esteem and masculinity that I had left.

For me, there was a lot of shame being diagnosed with depression – akin to not being a man. Not being able to do what a man should be able to do. Being a wimp; spineless. Needing help. Being vulnerable. The shame of getting medication. It crushed my ego.

I have always been a high achiever with masters' degree level education, and found it hard to accept that in my mind I was cracked and weak.

The GP I saw diagnosed me very quickly with severe depression and anxiety with suicidal ideation. He prescribed Paroxetine starting on a half dosage. I found the medication to be almost miraculous; the half dosage within 36-48 hours had such a dramatic effect. Nani said she could finally talk to me again and this was when she began to accept that I might have had an illness.

There were downsides with the medication. I had no emotion; neither happiness nor sadness. I had no fear when caution would have been prudent. It affected my sexual function.

I stayed on the half dosage after consulting with the GP via phone and began "better access" treatment with a local psychologist.

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The psychologist came highly recommended. After seven visits, he told me that he thought I was well when I knew I wasn't.

His methodology on reflection, probably didn't suit me. He seemed to ask me what I would like to discuss and then keep saying "how did you feel about that?" He said very little, probably hoping that as I unpacked my difficulties, that I would process and learn, but I didn't find it helpful. My mind was full of rumination and what seemed like insoluble problems. I needed some direction.

Later, I began to see a psychiatrist who seemed to understand me. She was a practicing Christian, so she had a handle on what it was like to be a pastor and have the blurring of boundaries, the unrealistic expectations from self and congregants, and the workload. She seemed very empathetic.

She seemed to genuinely understand how painful my experience was. Therapy with my psychiatrist may have been more successful because it was consumer led. I told her in the first instance, that I wanted to discuss issues, but that I needed her to direct me as to what I needed to think about in between our meetings. In terms of methodology I don't think there was one (I wasn't offered CBT for example) but it was a space in which I could process what had happened to me and slowly recover. The only criticism or disappointment I have in hindsight with my treatment, is that at no stage did any clinician refer me to one of the many NGO's that operate in the mental health sector. They would have been an amazing resource and support for my family – my wife and children, and myself.

For a long time, I didn't think I was making any progress and my symptoms and issues were multifaceted so it was a little like dealing with an octopus one leg at a time. The learning curve is about me and what works. I had to deal with ruminating. I needed to slow down, taking time, rest. Medication helped. Therapy worked wonders. Recovery meant decoupling my identity from my performance and has changed me immensely. I have a more solid sense of self. I individuated from my wife which was necessary. I'm still type A, but a very tempered one almost to the point of being covert. I had to discover what strengthened and energised me, and what didn't. I made meaning of my illness to somehow redeem it. I blogged, I journalled, I read and talked with other pastors and people who'd experienced depression. The blogging helped me rediscover how much I love writing, and have since been paid to write for a fishing magazine and daily blogged our entire last year's family trip backpacking in Borneo at www.downunder2borneo.wordpress.com

I resigned my position in January 2009, after which I picked tomatoes and worked as a fencing contractor on a dairy farm part time while Nani went back to work. The rest of the time I assumed the position of house dad (which I still do today). After 14 months, and with much trepidation I applied for a 15 hour per week position in Anglicare's Family Mental Health Support Service; an outreach and education service working with families for whom mental illness is a concern. My lived experience was welcomed and I found the work only enhanced my recovery. I've been in this position for just over two years now.

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The other instrumental thing in my recovery was developing the third space. Most of us operate in two spaces – work and home, but if there are pressures at both, it can be difficult. I started to develop this as a means of trying to get better on my own while working, but it was too little too late.

My third space (after some experimenting with motorbike riding) has turned out to be fly fishing. I'm in a local club and I enjoy the solitude, being in nature, exercise, photography and kayaking, fly tying and the skills challenges, and time away from home and work to get that vital headspace.

The motorbike is now for sale because I found that day dreaming about serendipity on a 650cc bike going at 110km/h wasn't a good fit.

Another space has been the local Men's Shed. I have been able to learn new skills from older men who are laid back and welcoming. Learning the new skills has increased my confidence and self esteem, and it has provided a safe place to socialise and be around other people. I found that staying at home on my days off in the early stages of recovery was difficult due to the rumination. I was anxious about the kids returning from school because they were so energetic and I would drink to calm down, but as time went by it started earlier and earlier in the day. Going to the men's shed and having other focusses during the day were important.

I found mindfulness (Dr Russ Harris' materials) to be potent. I found slowing down and being less ambitious and driven to be very effective.

Recovery is glacial and non-linear. It's more of an adventure than a trip from A to B. It's sometimes circular with the destination unclear. I often felt like a ship that had left the dock but unable to see my destination or to know if I would ever reach it.

While my capacity for productivity has not fully returned, nor my resilience, I have recovered enough, and developed an understanding of mental illness to the degree that I have been able to explain to the kids. One day after school I mustered up the courage to sit them down and tell them that I wasn't okay. They needed to know why I was behaving the way I was. I said "you know how when people get a really bad cold or earache they don't feel too well, but eventually they get better? Well I'm a bit sick too, but it's actually my brain and my emotions that aren't working properly. The good thing is I'm taking some medicine and there's a doctor helping me to get better." I used the opportunity to help them understand why I stress out and get intolerant and irritated with them at times.

On balance though, I'd have to say that being a father and largely recovered, is an advantage now, rather than a disadvantage. I'm teaching my kids the skills that I've learned being in recovery. We do things slower and more mindfully. We're less busy and less ambitious. I praise their character and efforts more than their performance. I teach them about feelings and what to do with them.

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One time I had my eldest son write down what his sadness was out of 10, and what he thought it might be that night. Later on I asked him what his sadness was down to, and it had dropped to zero out of ten - lower than he thought it would have. He's realising that emotions come and emotions go.

As a dad, I give our kids stability, strength and teach them to take risks. I challenge them and discipline them and seek to create in them resilience, identity and self esteem. I do this through taking them on mountain hikes, camping, hunting, fishing and "adventures". Being a dad is my primary role, one which I was abdicating in my former life.

I'm not glad I experienced the pain of mental illness, but I wouldn't swap what I have become or what I have learned from it for the world. I would have been the atypical career over-achiever whose kids grew up under his nose, became adults and left home while he was busy with his career.

Because I have time now, I can be involved with them, and hang out with them and enjoy them and my wife. I know I have a high earning capacity and if I need more money in the future, I can do that when they've left home.

For now, I am experiencing things money can't buy.

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