

Fathers' Experiences of Pregnancy: A Candid View

By Christine Belaire, Ph.D.

Participants:

Andy, father of two ages 4 and 2
Jeremy, father of one age 2
Roger, father of one age 10 months
Jimmy, father of three ages 6,4, and 2 months
Lance, father of two ages 6 and 4
Lee, father of one age 10 months
Mickey, expecting father
Dale, father of two ages 11 and 3
Erie, father of one age 4 months
Patrick, father of three ages 6, 4, and 3

It stands to reason that a father's experience of his wife's pregnancy will be different than her experience, but what do father's actually report as their experience? Do they feel connected or disconnected from the baby? Do they feel closer or more estranged from their wives? What are their feelings during the pregnancy? In this article, men give an honest, candid look at their experiences through the journey of pregnancy.

Connectedness with baby

Many mothers often report feeling connected to their baby from the beginning of pregnancy. They experience changes in their bodies from the very beginning, and those sensations are with them constantly throughout the pregnancy. Fathers, on the other hand, do not experience a physical change with pregnancy. In fact, it's often not until the mother shows or he can feel the baby move that fathers actually think there is something there. Further, many fathers report not feeling a connection with their baby until the birth. It's important to remember that everyone's experience is unique and that there are no right or wrong experiences. Each father will experience each pregnancy differently. The purpose of this article is to give voice to fathers' experiences, let them know that they are not alone, and not to judge any one experience as better or worse than another.

Many fathers interviewed reported feeling disconnected from the baby during the pregnancy. They reported difficulty realizing that the baby was real and not just an abstract concept. **Jeremy:** "I felt like I was missing out because they (mom and baby) already had their own relationship." **Roger:** "During the first trimester, I knew that she was pregnant, but I didn't think about the baby much." **Dale:** "The first pregnancy did not feel real until the c-section began and the baby was born." **Andy:** "It was unreal at the beginning. I knew in my head she was pregnant, but she looked the same." **Lee:** "It wasn't real until I heard her cry and saw her face."

Some fathers report feeling connected to the baby from early in the pregnancy. **Lance**: “I felt connected from the beginning. I read every book and knew what was happening with the baby from week to week.” **Mickey**: “This was a planned pregnancy so I have felt connected to the baby since the beginning, but as each day goes by it gets more and more real.” **Ernie**: “I took a long time to get pregnant so once it happened, I felt very connected.” And for other fathers, the process changes as the pregnancy develops. **Andy**: “Once I heard the heart beat and could put my hand on her stomach and feel the baby move, I was more connected.” **Roger**: “Because of our first miscarriage, I held back at first and did not get too excited until I knew everything was ok. The second trimester was a major milestone where I wanted to feel closer to the baby.” **Patrick**: “After we lost our first baby, I was more aware of the process of the pregnancy for our second baby and was able to appreciate that phase more.”

Multiple pregnancies bring with them a host of events and emotions that fathers experience. The first pregnancy seems to be more eventful for most fathers. **Jimmy**: “I was busy managing the situation and taking care of business. The first pregnancy was highly stressful because everything was new.” **Dale**: “With the first baby, we went to all the classes and read all the books.” With each subsequent pregnancy, fathers reported a different experience. **Andy**: “For the first child, I went to all of the doctor’s appointments; but for the second child, I only went to the big ones. During the second pregnancy, I was less nervous. It was all joy. The second was not as life changing.” **Jimmy**: “Everything was unknown in the first pregnancy, very stressful. By the third, I was more relaxed. It was more enjoyable.” **Dale**: “The first was more of a novelty, then it was second nature.” **Patrick**: “By the fourth pregnancy, it was common place. Our children were so close together that it seemed pregnancy was a continuous cycle.”

Regardless of the exact point of connection with the baby, whether it is from conception or birth, all fathers reported a strong connection with their children. Once connected, always connected.

Relationship with their wives

Pregnancy is a time of many changes. Men watch their wives change physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Women range from exhilarated, sick, excited, weepy, crabby, irritable, renewed, joyful, and every feeling in between. This can be a confusing time for men, who not only may not understand what is happening, they can not predict the next change. Often times these changes affect the closeness between husband and wife. Men report ranges of experiences from feeling detached from their wives to feeling more connected than ever.

Many men reported that their relationship with their wives did not change much during the pregnancy process. **Lee**: “Our relationship did not change during the pregnancy.” **Andy**: “Our relationship did not change that much except that we talked about the future and our own experiences with our parents a lot more.” Other fathers reported that they felt closer to their wives during pregnancy. **Jeremy**: “The pregnancy brought us closer. We reached a new level of our relationship. We did not feel like a family before the

baby.” **Jimmy**: “The pregnancy did not bring us closer, but the birth experience did.”
Roger: “I felt like we were on an adventure together.”

For couples that experience complications or medical conditions, those fathers seemed to focus more on their wives than on the baby. **Lee**: “When my wife was hospitalized due to high blood pressure, I was scared and worried about her.” **Lance**: “My wife’s medical issues made our relationship more of an issue. I was more in-tuned to her because of her diabetes. I was concerned about her health first, knowing that she had to be healthy then the baby would be healthy. **Patrick**: “I was concerned about my wife, then worried about the baby. **Roger**: “My wife had pre-eclampsia and was hospitalized. I was scared for her health and for the baby.”

Having a baby turns a couple into a family. Each family will use the process to define and contribute to their experience. Couples will navigate their way to the family they need and want.

Feelings experienced

Throughout the pregnancy, fathers report a wide variety of feelings regarding the baby, their wives, and their role as a father. **Andy**: “I felt scared at first. I didn’t know what to expect. I worried about having enough money to raise a child.” **Jeremy**: “It was scary. I was nervous and afraid about being a father. Then I would feel excited. It was up and down.” **Roger**: “I felt scared when I didn’t know what would happen with her medical problems. I felt the responsibility of helping my wife through the problems as well as the anticipation and excitement of fatherhood. I also felt fulfillment and hope for my child and his life.” **Mickey**: “I have felt excitement, nervousness, and a greater sense of responsibility.” **Jimmy**: “I felt stressed trying to compensate for my wife’s uncomfortableness.” **Lance**: “I felt excited, scared, anxious, and at peace. I prayed more during the pregnancy than in all my life, letting God take over.” **Dale**: “I felt worried until they found the heartbeat and relieved when they did. I prayed for a healthy baby and felt grateful for that healthy baby.” **Ernie**: “I felt excited and worried at the same time.” **Patrick**: “I felt anxious. I contemplated the magnitude of what it means to be responsible for a baby. I worried about paying for college for three kids and thought about all the crazy decisions that kids can make.” **Lee**: “I was excited about having a baby, but worried about the medical problems. I worried about having enough money for the baby.”

Everything that fathers feel during the pregnancy process is normal. All fathers will experience their own unique feelings about each pregnancy. It is important to understand your feelings and not to judge your experience or compare it to any one else’s experience.

Words of Wisdom

Each of the fathers interviewed imparted some advice to other fathers-to-be.

Andy: “Be as involved as you can. Go to the classes and doctor’s appointments and talk to your wife about how she is feeling.”

Jeremy: “Have confidence in yourself as a father. If you want to be a good father all it takes is effort. Enjoy the pregnancy and the new baby.”

Roger: “It is important to pay attention to your wife and try to take care of her along the way. Get involved in all aspects of the child’s life: change diapers, play, clean up. Enjoy it!. Remember the importance of prayer and trust the child to God. The child is a gift from God; our job is to raise him.

Jimmy: “Be involved, but not too stressed about any one thing. Enjoy it! Being involved makes a difference for the relationship with your wife and each child. Going through unpleasant things builds bonds.”

Lance: “This is a great time for mother and dad to grow closer to God. Let God be in control of whatever happens and find peace. Listen to what your wife is saying she needs, rather than relying on what you think she needs. Understand that in some situations, she is just emotional and everything is not a personal attack.

Dale: “Be prepared for anything, including mood swings.”

Ernie: “Stay involved and pay attention to your wife.”

Patrick: “Be more attuned to your wife. Make the effort to create a positive experience from the beginning so that the whole pregnancy will be positive even if you don’t feel 100% excited at first.”

Lee: “Pay attention to your wife’s emotions and know that she is experiencing many different emotions all the time. Don’t read extra into her reactions. Be prepared that your wife will at times act differently and can have mood swings.”

Each of the fathers interviewed provided a unique perspective into their experiences with pregnancy. Fathers are integral in the lives of their children and fathers of this generation are beginning their relationships with their children far before many fathers of previous generations who were not as actively involved. As a result, some fathers feel isolated and are not sure if their feelings and thoughts are similar or different from other fathers. Hopefully, the experiences of the fathers in this article will help other fathers know that they are not alone and provide a backdrop for discussion of these issues with other fathers.