

Single Dads Also Struggle With Poor Mental Health

Megan Brooks | December 06, 2016

Single fathers are just as likely as single mothers to report poor general health and poor mental health but are much less likely to seek help, new research shows.

"Single parents are a very vulnerable population in terms of both general health and mental health," principal investigator Maria Chiu, PhD, of the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, in Toronto, Ontario, noted in an interview with *Medscape Medical News*.

"Most studies have focused on single mothers, and rightly so, because they make up the largest proportion of single parents. However, there is a growing proportion of single dads not only in Canada but also the US and elsewhere," she said. "We found that single fathers actually have equally poor self-rated health and mental health as single mothers."

The study was [published online](#) December 6 in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

Single Parenting a Tough Go

The research team investigated differences in self-rated health and mental health among 1058 lone fathers relative to 20,692 partnered fathers and 5725 lone mothers using the Ontario component of the Canadian Community Health Survey.

The prevalence of poor/fair self-rated health was similar for lone fathers and lone mothers (11.6% and 12.5%, respectively), as was the prevalence of poor/fair self-rated mental health (6.2% and 8.4%, respectively). Prevalence remained similar after multivariable adjustment.

Lone fathers were more apt to report poor/fair health (odds ratio [OR], 1.53; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.07 - 2.17) and poor/fair mental health (OR, 2.09; 95% CI, 1.26 - 3.46) than partnered fathers after adjusting for sociodemographic factors, but these differences were no longer significant after accounting for stressors, including low income and unemployment.

The study also showed that single fathers were half as likely as single mothers to have sought help from a mental health professional (13.4% vs 25.3%).

"This speaks to the stigma that exists around mental health, particularly among men, who might be more reluctant to admit that they are suffering or to seek mental health services. There may also be structural barriers, meaning that single fathers may not have or perceive the same access to services that are offered to single mothers," Dr Chiu said in a statement.

"Because so much focus has been on single mothers, we need to recognize that the needs of single fathers are equally important, at the same time recognizing that men are less likely to seek help and use mental health services," she told *Medscape Medical News*.

"With the absence of a female spouse, there is often a reduction in protective behavior and an increase in risky behavior. Factors such as income and stressors of raising young children also factor in. In this sample of single fathers, 1 in 5 earned less than \$30,000 per year, 15% were unemployed, and almost half were raising kids younger than 11 years old," Dr Chiu noted.

A Neglected Bunch

Reached for comment, Natalie Compagni Portis, PsyD, MFT, clinical psychologist in private practice in Oakland, California, said, "This is an interesting study that gives yet more evidence to the notion that single parenting is hard and takes a toll in many ways on both single male and female parents. In the past, so much research was focused on men, and women were not studied.

"The fact that men seek out mental health treatment less in this situation is of note. Yet, we do know that men seek mental health treatment less often than women overall, and these results seem to mirror those data," she said. "Having worked with

single fathers, the anecdotal data suggest that men who are single parents are neglected. There are many more services and supports — though too few overall — geared toward single mothers. Though often when pursued, these services or grants may be offered to single fathers as well."

The study had no commercial funding. The authors and Dr Portis have disclosed no relevant financial relationships.

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