



Fatherhood can feel relentless. The demands of taking care of a young family never stop, but in tandem with that you've also got to potentially stay afloat at work. In order to withstand those twin pressures, you need to stay vigilant about your self-care. "Otherwise, it's just not sustainable," says Dr Sarah Robuck, Gidget Foundation Australia Clinical Psychologist.

There's a good reason, she explains, why aeroplane safety protocol recommends you don your own oxygen mask in an emergency before attending to your kids. "If you're not looking after yourself, you can't look after somebody else," Dr Robuck says.

Use these self-care tips to boost your resilience and stay physically and mentally on track.

1. KEEP ON MOVING

Dad-bod is a real phenomenon – a study in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* found that young men who become fathers drop an average of five hours of exercise per week <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953611005120?via%3Dihub> That's hardly surprising when you're suddenly so time-poor but maintaining some form of physical activity will help you feel better in body and mind. "It releases a whole bunch of different neurochemicals that help improve mood and are protective against perinatal depression and anxiety," Dr Robuck says.

You don't have to become a gym junkie or train for a marathon. "Doing anything that gets your heart rate up a bit is really helpful – even if it's just getting off the train one stop earlier and having 10 more minutes to walk home," Dr Robuck says.

2. GET SLEEP SMART

Boring but true: you need to start prioritising your sleep. As a new dad, you can't control how many times your baby wakes up during the night. What you can ensure is that you go to bed a little bit earlier to make up for the inevitable disturbances to come. Even if that means only watching one episode of your favourite TV series.

"Also learn how to nap," Dr Robuck suggests. "It might not happen easily, but even just lying down and giving your body the opportunity to rest for a 45-minute window is restorative."

3. UPGRADE YOUR FUEL

When sleep-deprived you're already running close to empty. That's why it's doubly important to ensure that

you're powered up on quality fuel. "If your energy is already depleted because of sleep disturbances and then you're not feeding yourself with really nutritious foods, then you're just draining the tank even further," Dr Robuck says.

Staying properly hydrated and eating plenty of fruit and vegetables can help offset some of the negative impact of sleep loss. "It's a way of protecting yourself from ill-health and giving yourself a bit more energy," Dr Robuck says.

4. STAY CONNECTED

Fatherhood can prove socially isolating. A survey from the Movember Foundation found that one in five men lost close friends within a year of becoming a dad. That's a worry, because hanging out with your mates is an effective way to decompress and protect your mental health.

Try and make time to catch up with friends, even if it's just touching base for a quick cup of coffee. "Ask yourself: 'What can I do that's going to lift my spirits a little bit and also increase connection?'" Dr Robuck suggests.

In addition, you might start up a WhatsApp group with your mates who are dads, Dr Robuck suggests. "That point of connection can be really helpful as you can connect with each other and ask: 'Hey, anybody else been up since 4am?'"

5. KEEP TALKING

The first months of dad life can prove exhausting, stressful and difficult at times. But how do you know if you're just experiencing the usual rigmarole of early fatherhood or suffering from perinatal depression and anxiety? "If you're not getting enjoyment out of the things you normally would be, that can be a warning sign," Dr Robuck says.

But whether you're struggling a lot or just a little – it's vital to open up and share your concerns. You should discuss it with your partner, talk to your mates or even broach the subject with your GP. "At any point you can ask for help," Dr Robuck says. "There's no such thing as 'serious enough'. It's about learning those assertiveness skills to go, 'All right, I'm struggling. What can I do now?'" ●

