

Single Dads Have a Higher Mortality Rate Than Others: Ways to Stay Healthy

Stay connected, reach out for help and eat healthy meals.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer May 14, 2018, at 12:54 p.m.



Build a healthy social network to fight loneliness. (GETTY IMAGES)

BEING A SINGLE FATHER can be enormously challenging and stressful. It may also shorten your lifespan, a recent study published in *The Lancet Public Health* suggests.

Researchers, who derived their study population from the Canadian Community Health Survey, tracked more than 40,000 parents for more than 11 years and found that mortality in single fathers was three times higher than mortality rates in single mothers and partnered fathers. Mortality rates for single fathers were also higher than the rates in partnered mothers. Researchers did not determine the causes of the disparity in mortality rates. The CCHS defined single parents as divorced, separated, widowed or single

and never married, non-cohabitating men or women aged 15 or older living in a household with one or more biological or adopted child younger than age 25, and no other adults.

However, the study suggests that a number of factors might be relevant to the higher mortality rate for single dads. Researchers noted that single fathers [ate fewer vegetables and fruits](#) than other parents; engaged in greater monthly binge-drinking than other moms and dads, and that the single fathers in the study were significantly older than the other parents. As a group, they also had a significantly lower income and were more likely to have been unemployed in the past year than partnered fathers. "We found that single fathers had several risk factors that were associated with premature mortality," researchers wrote.

Another possible risk factor for single fathers: [loneliness](#). Researchers noted that previous studies have shown that single fathers "are significantly less likely to have relationships and connections within and between social networks that could help to enhance their health, productivity and well-being in society." Evidence is growing in medical literature that suggests that loneliness and social isolation are important risk factors for early death and could even be as important as [obesity](#) and [smoking](#) as predictors of premature death, researchers noted. Loneliness is associated with [poor sleep](#), higher levels of stress hormones, an increased risk of [heart disease](#) and accelerated [cognitive decline](#), researchers wrote. One recent study suggests that social isolation and loneliness dramatically increase the risk for early mortality.

"Single fathers face different challenges in managing stress than single mothers," says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. "While mothers face the challenges of providing security and nurturing, fathers must meet those demands, and are also expected to take on the tasks of practical household duties. These were traditionally carried out for centuries by women and are now being shared more widely with men. The learning curve has been very difficult for many men in this area, as they tend to feel easily overwhelmed by tending to the home."

To complicate matters, many men have a difficult time acknowledging they are having difficulty in their lives, says Dr. Michael D. McGee, a board-certified psychiatrist and the chief medical officer at The Haven at Pismo, an addiction treatment facility near San Luis Obispo, California. He's also the author of "The Joy of Recovery: A Comprehensive Guide to Healing from Addiction."

Many men – including single fathers – struggle, he says, with an issue that afflicts people with an [addiction](#): a sense of denial. "Men are socialized to deny their painful emotions," McGee says. "We're socialized to not cry, to not hurt. Men tend to deny their need for emotional support."

If you're a single father and want to maximize your odds of living a longer and healthier life, experts recommend these 10 strategies:

1. Acknowledge that you're stressed out. The first step to getting help is to acknowledge you need it, McGee says. "Give yourself permission to acknowledge you're having a hard time and you need help," he says. "Give yourself permission to be human and realize that if you're having a difficult time it doesn't mean you're less of a man – it just means you're human."

2. Set realistic expectations. Avoid setting impossible standards for yourself, which can [add to your stress](#) when you don't meet them, McGee says. "Nobody is a perfect parent, friend or anything else," he says. "Mistakes are part of life. We need to realize we won't parent perfectly and instead learn and grow from our mistakes."

3. Reach out for help. Support is available from a variety of sources, McGee says. You can find [support groups](#) for single parents and for men with online searches or through Parents Without Partners, the largest international nonprofit dedicated to the welfare and interests of single parents and their kids. Trusted friends and relatives can also be good sources of support, McGee says. "When we're facing difficulties, we benefit from the ability to share our troubles," he says. "It's helpful to talk to people who can say, 'I've been in that situation.'" Members of a support group in similar situations can share their experience and provide strategies for challenges you will face as a single dad, he says.

4. Build a healthy social network. Belonging to a social network of well-adjusted friends can help you ward off [loneliness](#), says John Badalament, director of programs at The Fatherhood Project at [Massachusetts General Hospital](#) in Boston. The Fatherhood Project is a nonprofit in the department of psychiatry. Building a social network will entail getting out of your home, he says. "It's really important for single dads to make the effort to reach out to other male [and female for that matter] friends and family members and make a plan to get together," he says. "That could mean meeting for a movie, grabbing a meal or a drink or going for a bike ride. Making a specific plan can help fend off the last-minute resistance many guys feel when the time comes to leave the house. I personally have to battle with myself at times to stick to

the plan and not take the easy road of lazing on the couch." If your child or children play sports, make friends with the parents of the other kids who are happy and well-adjusted, McGee says. They can become part of your social network.

5. Invite people into your home. It's also important to bring people into your house or apartment, Badalament says. "There are a number of reasons this is important. The first is it will motivate you to *make your house into a home*, if it isn't already. It doesn't have to be a big group, but ideally a mix of people, usually informal but sometimes more formal, like a dinner party," he says. "You can invite new and old friends, work and nonwork pals. What really matters is you bring people into your place and don't stay isolated."

6. To eat a healthy diet, learn how to cook. Badalament, who is going through a divorce, says he knew how to cook before he got married. But for many single fathers, "the routine of cooking can be a shock to the system," he says. If you don't know how to cook, invest in a class and learn basic cooking skills; you can find lots of healthy [recipes](#) on Pinterest. Master a few healthy recipes for well-balanced meals and keep them in a folder, or place them on a calendar for the coming week, Badalament says. Get your kids involved in cooking. "It's a great way to bond as a new family unit and help them develop skills they'll need," Badalament says. As part of your cooking education, you can also order healthy ingredients and easy-to-follow recipes from services like [blueapron.com](#). Some of these food services have free or low-cost introductory trial periods.

7. Volunteer. Working on behalf of a cause you believe in is a good way to meet people, and can give you a positive feeling of having a sense of purpose in life, says Dr. Don Mordecai, Kaiser Permanente's national leader for mental health and wellness. "You'll probably find that by helping people, they'll appreciate just the little bit you give of your time, and it will help you feel less lonely or depressed and good about yourself," Mordecai says.

8. Adopt a pet. You may feel less lonely if you have a pet, Mordecai says. Research shows that pets can improve your physical and mental health. "For example, if you have a dog and you take it for a walk – or rather it'll take you for a walk – you'll have company and you may also get healthier," he says. Walking just a half hour a day provides many health benefits, such as lowering stress, anxiety and blood pressure, he says.

9. Get some exercise. Take a walk, join a [pickup basketball or soccer game](#) or hit the gym, Mordecai says. "Physical activity is a great way to relieve

stress or whatever may be bothering you," he says. Exercise releases endorphins in your body, a chemical that makes you feel more positive. You might also [make some new friends](#) if you join a pickup game or start frequenting a gym for workouts or a park for walks, he says.

10. Try meditation. Take at least 10 minutes of quiet time each day to sit, relax and breathe, Gadhia-Smith says. [Meditation](#) can help you manage anxiety and stress. "This very small investment of time will reap great rewards in your soul and in your sense of inner peace," she says. "You can sit and count your exhales from one to 10, or use an app like Insight Timer." Headspace and Calm are also popular meditation apps, McGee says.