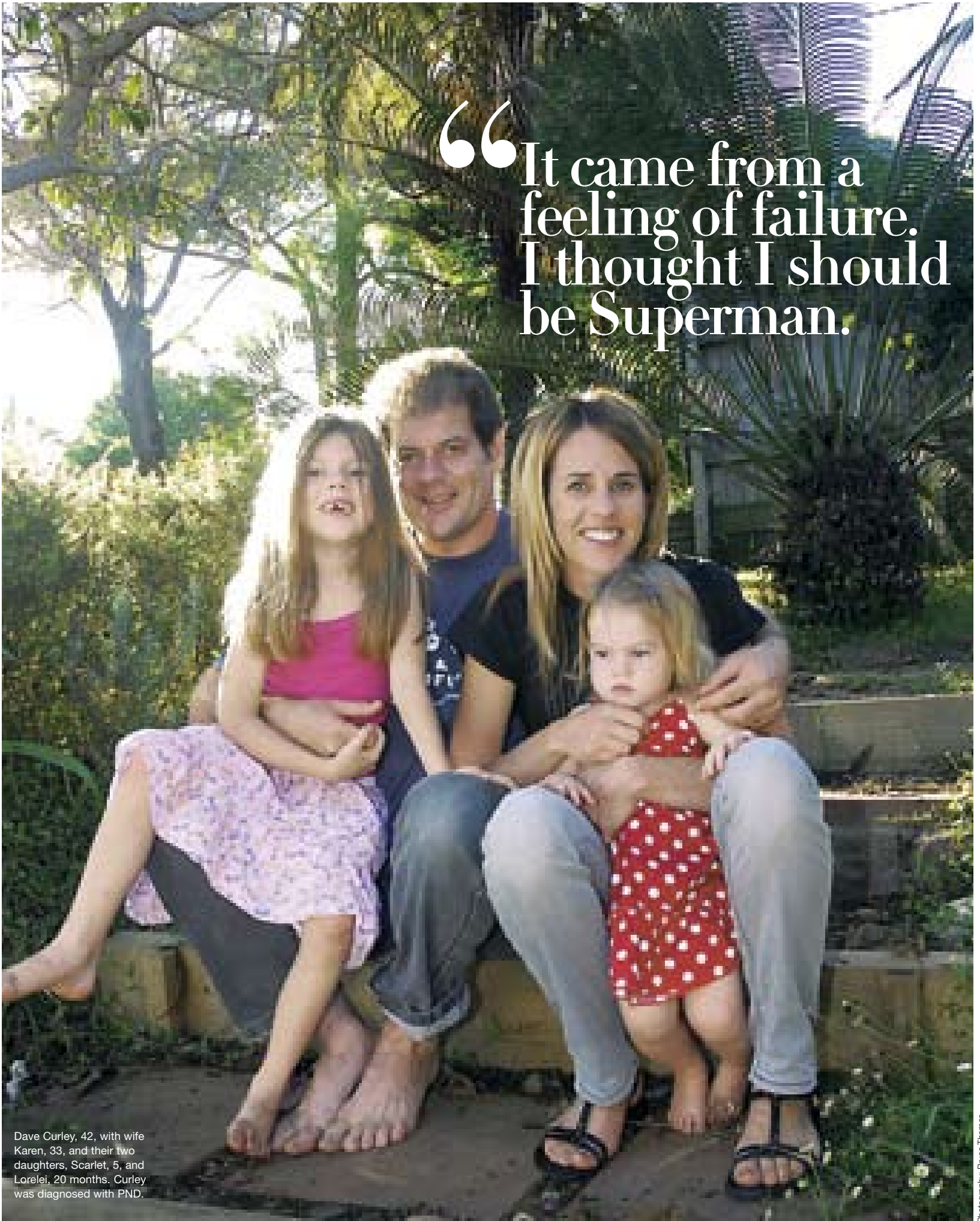


“It came from a feeling of failure. I thought I should be Superman.”



Dave Curley, 42, with wife Karen, 33, and their two daughters, Scarlet, 5, and Lorelei, 20 months. Curley was diagnosed with PND.

*It's not only mums who are affected by postnatal depression. Whether it's sleep deprivation, financial pressure or a perceived lack of emotional support, dads feel it, too. Claire Scobie meets two fathers who, following the birth of their children, experienced inexplicable sadness.*

# Daddy blues

**W**hen David Cowling held his son, Aidan, for the first time, the experience was “magic”.

Throughout wife Michelle’s first pregnancy, he’d been utterly supportive. But in the weeks after the birth in 2003, when the first-time father should have been filled with jubilation, Cowling felt sad and agitated.

According to national depression initiative Beyond Blue, about 16 per cent of mothers in Australia are likely to suffer postnatal depression (PND). What’s less-known is that first-time fathers can also suffer degrees of depression. According to Karina Bria, a PhD student from the University of Adelaide, about 10 per cent of fathers will develop PND. “[However], many fathers don’t acknowledge it,” says Bria, who is conducting a national study on PND among first-time fathers. “It’s taboo and seen as a sign of weakness.”

Cowling, a calm, softly spoken 35-year-old, considers himself “strong-willed and strong-minded”. He and Michelle, 34, had decided on a home birth and made a comprehensive birth plan with their midwife. After a protracted labour, lasting nearly six days at their house in Baulkham Hills, north-western Sydney, Aidan arrived suddenly. “The birth ran

smoothly, it was just a process we had to go through,” says Michelle, a full-time mum, cuddling their two-year-old daughter, Elyssa.

Sitting side-by-side on their sofa, the couple finish each other’s sentences. They say they have always been good communicators. After Aidan’s birth, “That shut down,” says Cowling. “We’d fight more often.”

Aidan not sleeping didn’t help. But, says Cowling, things really began to go “off the rails”, because he was working 12-hour days in a city call centre and barely saw his son.

Although the situation eased in early 2004, when Cowling changed to a local job with flexitime, he remained “more pissed off” and “unusually tired”. He put it down to being frustrated with Michelle. “You think it’s the other person, not you. At the time, we really saw each other as the cause of our problems,” says Cowling.

Michelle felt at a loss to know what to do. “We both weren’t thinking too clearly,” she remembers. “It didn’t cross my mind that it could have been depression. I hadn’t been exposed to it before.”

In Bellingen in NSW, Dave Curley was also struggling with baby Scarlet, who slept barely an hour at a time. Despite a visit to one of the Tresillian Family

Care Centres, which provide advice on caring for babies, nine weeks after Scarlet’s birth in December, 2002, nothing seemed to help settle her. “She’s five now and she still doesn’t sleep much,” says Curley, 42, a community worker. Although he and wife Karen, a former youth worker, had been together 15 years before starting a family, “When a duo becomes a trio it shakes things up so much,” says Curley.

The fact that a husband is competing with the baby for attention or affection can be a contributing factor, says Bria, especially those for whom their partner is their main source of emotional support.

“While a woman is struggling with her new role as a mother,” adds David Vernon, editor of the anthology *Men At Birth*, “she doesn’t have the space to deal with her man’s worries.” For many men, their education about childbirth and fatherhood comes from television. “Society tells us that a new baby is a ‘bundle of joy’; so when some men find that their bundle is the cause of them becoming depressed, acknowledging this fact is very difficult.”

Vernon, who is writing a book about PND in families, says, “The irony is that acknowledging the link between the birth and depression is the start of dealing with the problem.” →



Although David Cowling, 35, felt “magic” about holding his son, Aidan (now 5), for the first time, he was “sad” and “agitated” for weeks afterwards.

# “You think it’s the other person, not you. We saw each other as the problem.”

Belinda Horton, CEO of the Post and Antenatal Depression Association (PANDA) in Victoria, says it’s rare for depressed dads to ring. “It tends to be the new mum,” she says. Neither Cowling nor Curley had a history of depression and nor did their partners. “How dare I think I could have PND?” says Curley. “That’s stepping on women’s territory.”

Contrary to popular belief, says Horton, there’s no real evidence to support the theory that PND in women is hormonally or biologically triggered. In both women and men, it’s caused by factors ranging from the drastic lifestyle change, to financial pressures, sleep deprivation and birth trauma. Bria’s study of the 25 men and their first-time fatherhood experiences revealed that lack of sex wasn’t an issue: “They were worried about their wives not being there emotionally, rather than physically,” she says.

The men from her survey are from different nationalities and varied professions, and more than three-quarters are “well-paid”. Only one father was predisposed to depression and none of the men’s partners have PND, thus “debunking the theory that PND in men is a correlation to PND in women,” explains Bria.

“Some of the PND diagnosed probably isn’t PND at all – it’s exhaustion,” cautions Vernon, but what is clear is that husbands have a much greater shared responsibility and few role models to follow. “In the past the woman was at home and the man at work,” he says. “Now the man is asked to do tasks that he has rarely seen men [or his father] performing before.”

While some new dads can find it hard to bond with the baby, giving rise to terrible guilt, for Cowling, “There was never any question of wanting Aidan or not wanting him. It was nothing associated with him.” By June 2004, as the Cowlings’ relationship deteriorated – “it could have gone either way,” says David – they took Aidan to one of Sydney’s Karitane centres, which assist parents and young children, especially those with sleep problems.

The family spent five days there at a live-in facility. This proved to be the turning point. Not only did Aidan start to sleep better, David attended a dads-only session where the psychologist discussed PND. “It really rang true for me. From there I went to see my local GP and he prescribed antidepressants.” The couple then saw a counsellor individually and together.

Within three months, Cowling took himself off the antidepressants and started to feel better. In retrospect, he realises that at the time he felt overwhelmed by the financial burdens and was “anxious about being a father”. He was also resentful as he’d hoped he and Michelle, who married in 2002, would travel together before they started a family.

Curley says he was too proud to go to a GP. In 2005 he started seeing a counsellor at his work and six months later, in January 2006, he was diagnosed with depression. “It was only retrospectively that I was diagnosed with PND, when the counsellor could see the depression started in the early part of my [first] child’s life,” he says. “It came from a feeling of failure. I thought I should be Superman. Depression comes from feeling that you are not managing all these changes.” He didn’t suffer it when his second child, Lorelei, was born in June 2006. “There were less challenges in terms of sleep and I had a better understanding of what to expect,” he says.

Curley now works for the Uniting Care Burnside “I’m a dad” program, it’s part of the Coffs Harbour Men in Families Project for first-time fathers, developed by psychologist Tony White, a pioneer of father-inclusive programs. Curley believes that services from antenatal classes to preschool need to be more dad-friendly. This is particularly pertinent for those blokes who aren’t handling the postnatal period so well because, according to research published in *The Lancet*, there’s a risk that depressed fathers can trigger poorer social, emotional and behavioural outcomes in their young children, especially in boys.

The signs of PND, says Horton, are clear: “Behaviour changes, increased work hours, not being at home enough, anger, violence, conflict with partner and alcohol.” The key is to get help early.

Curley got through it by getting back into coaching soccer and playing in a band with five mates. “I can talk about anything to those guys. They saved my life,” he says.

David Cowling switched careers and now runs his wedding video business from home. For his partner, Michelle, the situation improved considerably when they acknowledged the problem. She says, “When we knew what it was, we knew how we could help each other, we could talk about it more.” Up until then, she’d felt frustration and says they both had kept a lot to themselves. Now, just days away from the birth of their third child, she looks back on it as another of life’s hurdles “that we got through together”. ●

If you suspect that you or a family member or friend could be affected by postnatal depression, go to [www.panda.org.au](http://www.panda.org.au) or [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au).