Article

Impact of Relationship Breakdown, Including Abuse and Negotiation of Co-Parenting Arrangements, on Fathers' Mental Health, Help-Seeking, and Coping

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Abstract: Background: This study explores the impact of family breakdown, separation, post-separation abuse, and negotiating of co-parenting arrangements on fathers' physical and mental health, as well as their coping mechanisms and experiences of support, both informal and formal. Methods: Using data from a survey of 141 fathers and interviews with 30 participants, we examined the impact of family breakdown on fathers and their children and how they coped and were supported. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify key themes. Results: Findings highlighted four primary themes: the impact on fathers, the impact on children, fathers' strategies for coping, and fathers' experience of formal and informal support. Conclusions: The results indicate that fathers need greater support mechanisms post-separation, in ways that specifically appreciate their unique experiences as men and fathers.

Keywords: family breakdown; fathers; support; mental health; suicide

1. Introduction

Studies consistently report that family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) cause a variety of negative emotions and states, such as loss, grief, and sadness (Keshet and Rosenthal 1978; Simpson et al. 2014), loneliness (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980), inadequacy and incompetence (Hetherington et al. 1985), shame and guilt (Stack 2000), anger (Lehr and MacMillan 2001; Lund 1987), frustration (Kruk 1991), hurt and pain (Kruk 1991), sadness (Kruk 1991), and stress (Lehr and MacMillan 2001; Millings et al. 2020). Moreover, particularly in cases where the couple were married and/or have children together, negative emotions about the relationship and its dissolution can be sustained through necessary post-breakup communication during legal divorce proceedings and negotiations of parental responsibilities (Braver et al. 2013; Millings et al. 2020).

These negative feelings have then been found to correlate with outcomes such as poor psychological and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001). Specifically, as a result of negative emotions and practical challenges experienced during FBSD, divorced and separated parents commonly report poor mental health, such as depression (Davies et al. 1997; Monroe et al. 1999; Shapiro and Lambert 1999; Shapiro 1996) revolving around feelings of being inadequate and incompetent, amounting to unhealthily low self-esteem (Coley and Hernandez 2006; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2002; Lehr and MacMillan 2001). Furthermore, these mental health difficulties can also manifest physically through

other symptoms, such as sleep problems, fatigue, and reduced appetite (Jacobs 1986). This can have knock-on effects on other aspects of life, such as one's career and finances (Kruk 2015; Lehr and MacMillan 2001), amounting to an overall dissatisfaction with life (Rhoades and Bell 2012) and, in the most serious cases, leading people to consider and/or attempt suicide (Lee-Maturana et al. 2020).

While FBSD is distressing for both men/fathers and women/mothers, several studies appear to provide evidence of gendered experiences in relation to FBSD. For example, Trovato (1991) found that unmarried and divorced men are less likely to visit a primary care service than married and co-habiting men (Blumberg et al. 2014), and thus, they expose themselves to greater health risks. This detrimental effect on physical health can also be explained by other more 'male' reactions to FBSD, such as 'unhealthy' and externalising coping strategies (e.g., drinking more alcohol: Power et al. 1999). The potentially gendered nature of the FBSD experience is best captured in Kposowa's (2003) finding that men are almost ten times more likely to die by suicide following divorce.

Evans et al.'s (2016) review provides further support for gender differences in suicidality following FBSD as the majority of included studies (12 of 19) found that men were at greater risk than women of suicide following separation or divorce. One study of particular note within this review is Shiner et al.'s (2009) study, which categorised 100 deaths by suicide detailed in coroner files based on their psychosocial context. One of the resulting categories was 'separation from children', where suicides were exclusively committed by fathers. These findings suggest that fathers may either be particularly vulnerable to reduced contact with children or may experience more adverse outcomes and severe mental health issues associated with this situation (Affleck et al. 2018; Hine and Bates 2024).

Findings on suicide risk may explain why many FBSD researchers focus on the theme of 'loss'. For example, Bohannan (1970) describes six forms of divorce, which illustrate the various losses a parent can experience concurrently during a relationship breakdown. These are the emotional divorce, the co-parental divorce, the legal divorce, the economic divorce, the community divorce, and the psychic divorce. Together, these encapsulate ways in which parents report the loss and require restoration following the family breakdown (Millings et al. 2020), which stretch across finances, employment, housing, mental and physical health, social relationships, and, crucially, one's relationship with one's children (Natalier 2012).

Both men (including fathers) and women (as mothers) experience these varying levels of loss following FBSD. However, men, especially fathers, may again experience these losses through a gendered lens due to the expectations placed upon them by both society and themselves. Men, for example, tend to have less developed, intimate relationships with peers (Sherrod 2018) and may experience greater feelings of isolation and fewer sources of support following FBSD. Moreover, in the UK and many countries, fathers are the overwhelming majority of non-resident parents (NRPs) following FBSD (90–95%; Office for National Statistics 2013) and may be more susceptible to a disruption in their parental relationships by leaving the family home. Arguably, the part or sometimes complete loss of contact with one's children can be seen as the most fundamental loss, which has been reported in qualitative research as "like losing part of my body" (Kruk 1991).

This loss of contact also comes with the loss of other more abstract elements of fatherhood, such as the loss of control or input into the children's upbringing by "contributing really very little to the lives of the kids" (Kruk 1991). Furthermore, this can play a part in the perceived loss of the 'father' identity, with fathers feeling as though they perform "more like a friend role" (Kruk 1991) as their limited contact time with their children only permits a stunted superficial level of engagement as opposed to the multidimensional relationship achievable through the familiarity and regularity of day-to-day contact. The importance

of fathers' involvement in children's lives is well documented. Research demonstrates that children with involved fathers are more likely to experience positive outcomes across emotional, behavioural, and academic domains (Lamb 2010; Sarkadi et al. 2008). Moreover, paternal involvement has been associated with reduced externalising behaviours, higher cognitive competence, and improved emotional regulation in children (Cabrera et al. 2000). Thus, when fathers are removed—whether through circumstantial or purposive means— there are not only implications for the father's well-being but, potentially, for the child's development and welfare as well.

Disruption to parental relationships can also occur purposively and as a result of actions taken by the other parent. These are known as parental alienating behaviours (Harman et al. 2022), and they describe actions taken to disrupt the parent–child bond, such as bad-mouthing, lying to the child about the other parent, and disrupting contact. Again, while evidence demonstrates that both mothers and fathers are susceptible to alienating behaviours (Harman et al. 2022), other work has highlighted the potentially gendered experiences and risks of fathers in particular. Indeed, myriad factors, such as negative societal stereotypes about fatherhood and the value of fathers, their likely position as non-resident parents, and the positioning and potential prejudices of various systems (i.e., family courts) may place fathers as particularly vulnerable to alienation from their children (Hine et al. 2025b).

Reassuringly, studies suggest the quality of the relationship between a parent and their child is the most important predictor of parents' well-being post-separation, over and above the level of contact. For example, while Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan's (1999) review found that divorce has a profoundly negative effect on father–child relationships, Shapiro and Lambert's (1999) findings make the important distinction that this only occurs with non-resident fathers whose relationships with their children decline in quality following a family breakdown. Conversely, resident fathers who maintain a post-separation relationship with their children to a similar quality level as fathers who are not divorced or separated do not show these effects.

In a longer-term study, Ahrons and Tanner (2003) asked adult children about the impact of divorce on their parental relationships 20 years later. He found that while 38% of children reported the relationship with their father to have become worse, almost half (49%) of participants reported the relationship to have improved, and 12% reported it to stay the same. In comparison, the majority of participants reported that their relationships with their mothers improved (60%), while fewer reported that the relationship became worse (27%), and a similar proportion reported no change (13%). Exploring the factors that moderate the quality of the father–child relationship post-FBSD, Kalmijn (2015) found that the negative effect of the family breakdown on the parent–child relationship was weakened when the father was highly involved in childrearing during the relationship, when the father was highly educated (as they may be better equipped to engage in post-divorce or post-separation negotiations and proceedings), and when there was a high degree of interparental conflict during the relationship (suggesting the breakup had a stress-relief effect on the children involved: Yu et al. 2010). This might also explain why fathers who have a relationship with their children, purposively targeted post-separation, report some of the worst outcomes (Hine and Bates 2024).

With the experience of multiple losses, feelings of grief naturally follow. Kruk (1991) applies Kübler-Ross' (1973) traditional five stages of grief (originally applied to grieving a death) to the context of grieving the loss of a relationship, progressing through the same five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In a similar vein, Wiseman (1975) adapted Kübler-Ross' framework to outline the following five-stage process in relation to FBSD: (1) denial, (2) loss and depression, (3) anger, (4) reorientation of

lifestyle and identity, and (5) acceptance. However, as Kruk (1991) importantly pointed out, this formulation does not consider the nuanced experience of loss as experienced by a father following a family breakdown. For example, fathers may experience recurring grief as they repeatedly exchange children back and forth between their and their co-parent's household (Elizabeth 2019). Moreover, as the majority of non-resident parents, this grief may be amplified through having considerably less contact than the other parent (depending on arrangements). Indeed, research has found fathers describing each handover as "dying all over again" (Arendell 1992). This highlights the intense trauma parents suffer as they experience the cyclical and repeating wave of losing time and contact with their children. This is complicated by the fact that they are experiencing grief for someone who is still alive and with whom they may see to some extent regularly. This is referred to in the literature as 'ambiguous loss' and a 'disenfranchised grief' (Lee-Maturana et al. 2022; Thornton et al. 1991). For men, a lack of social support, combined with cultural pressures on men (to resist appearing weak and to conform to the values of hegemonic masculinity) (Connell 2020; Yousaf et al. 2015) add to male help-seeking resistance (Addis and Mahalik 2003; Oliver et al. 2005). As a result, men may experience exacerbated adverse outcomes associated with grief, such as poor psychological well-being (Parkes and Weiss 1983).

When exploring effective coping strategies for these serious issues, much of the research has focused on communication processes (Afifi and Hamrick 2013) and the use of social networks (Sprecher et al. 2006). Both are captured in Treloar's (2019) work, which identified several coping strategies used by parents following high-conflict FBSD:

1. Advocating for the reform of family law and related systems (e.g., welfare, child protection) as a way of processing their feelings of frustration and injustice and as a way of empowering themselves;
2. Beginning new careers;
3. Recreational activities, including challenges to build confidence and resilience;
4. Social support from friends and family;
5. Spirituality;
6. Therapy.

This is reflected in work with parents who have purposively had the bond with their children disrupted, such as Poustie et al.'s (2018) thematic analysis, which revealed four predominantly used coping strategies:

1. General hope, resilience, and stoicism;
2. Therapy;
3. Social support;
4. Educating self and others about PA.

Lee-Maturana et al. (2020) also explored coping strategies adopted by these parents in their qualitative study and identified the following:

1. Social, mental, and physical activities;
2. Seeking professional help;
3. Keeping busy, e.g., through work;
4. Family support;
5. Hobbies;
6. Faith.

Indeed, strong interpersonal relationships with others have been found to have a protective effect on how individuals are impacted by challenging life events, such as FBSD (Hughes et al. 1993; Richmond and Christensen 2001). Research testing a stress-buffering model for divorced fathers suggested that noncustodial fathers relied more on relatives, and custodial fathers relied more on new relationships for parenting support (DeGarmo

et al. 2008). Research comparing the effect of co-parenting and social support on adolescent versus adult fathers suggests that paternal social support and parenthood programs are significantly more effective in younger samples, highlighting the need for further research regarding the focus, delivery, and impact of fathers' programs (Fagan and Lee 2011). Complementary research on fathers' engagement with social support options suggests that fathers may not benefit as much from these protective factors following a family breakdown due to broader issues associated with help-seeking (Coley and Hernandez 2006; Warshak 2000) and their lack of social support networks. Worryingly, a lack of social support may also explain middle-aged men's greater suicide risk following relationship breakdown (Evans et al. 2016; Joiner et al. 2012; Scourfield and Evans 2014).

Access to professional mental health support has also been demonstrated to have several potential benefits for fathers, including enhanced emotional awareness, increased self-esteem, greater perceived parenting competence, empowerment in helping others deal with their problems, and sustained motivation to continue efforts to achieve any or increased contact with their children (Lehr and MacMillan 2001). However, as with social support, there is now well-established evidence of men's low engagement with mental health services (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. 2019), which places fathers in a highly vulnerable position following FBSD. DeGarmo et al. (2008) recommend several focus areas for father-oriented parenting programmes, including rethinking a man's role, building interpersonal skills, exploring help-seeking behaviours, and problem-solving.

In addition, where post-separation abuse is present, it is important to acknowledge that professional support can be invaluable, especially in helping to validate men's experiences of intimate partner violence, through which other forms of support can be built upon and accessed (Hine et al. 2020, 2021; Wallace et al. 2019a, 2019b). In these circumstances, it is important to consider men's need for confidentiality when receiving emotional and practical support in this context (Hine et al. 2021) and their need for this support to be tailored appropriately to their gender and other intersectional characteristics (Hine et al. 2022a, 2022b). However, there is an apparent lack of support services for men/fathers (including general mental health support and specialist abuse services), an issue that requires urgent rectification (DeGarmo et al. 2008; Pearson and Fagan 2019). Moreover, including for abused fathers, interactions with legal systems (e.g., family courts) are described as overwhelmingly negative (Hine et al. 2025b), the impact of which requires further investigation.

Taken together, the literature in this area suggests that FBSD is often deeply distressing for individuals and can cause a wide range of physical and mental health issues. There is also a strong suggestion that men/fathers and women/mothers may respond to and experience the impact of FBSD through a gendered lens (for example, men's increased risk of suicide ideation and completion). This supports previous work exploring the gendered experiences of fathers experiencing FBSD and engaging in co-parenting negotiations (Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b). The present study thus examined the impact of FBSD on fathers, including their relationships with children and when abuse and alienating behaviours are present.

2. Materials and Methods

The 141 men who participated in this qualitative study are the same sample as those described in two previous papers on this large-scale project (Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b). This third and final manuscript utilising this sample will explore the impact of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD), and associated abuse and system involvement, on fathers' health and mental health and their associated coping and help-seeking behaviours.

2.1. Participants

Information about the sample is outlined in two previous papers from this project (Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b). However, in brief, 141 men who took part in the survey (Mage = 45.54, SD = 9.22) were mostly White (89.3%), heterosexual (97.9%), and either divorced (40%), separated but not previously married (35%), or separated and previously married (25%). The 30 men who took part in interviews (Mage = 43.97, SD = 9.76) were again mostly White, heterosexual, and had a similar spread of marital status.

2.2. Materials & Procedure

Again, as described in two previous papers on this project (Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b), both the survey and interview schedule used in this study were developed based on previous work in this area (e.g., Bates and Hine 2023; Hine and Bates 2024). Examples of questions include: "Please describe the events that took place during the end of the relationship", "Did you ever experience any behaviour from your ex-partner that you would describe as abusive during your relationship?", "When thinking about all of the experiences described so far related to the end of your relationship and the events following, how would you say this has impacted you?", and "Following the end of your relationship, did you engage in any coping strategies you deem to be 'unhealthy' or maladaptive?".

We recruited participants by advertising the survey via social media (e.g., Twitter, now known as 'X') and with the support of organisations that support fathers in this position. Posts contained a link to a website where more information was provided about the eligibility criteria for participation and where to direct questions. For the survey, this webpage contained a link to the survey on Qualtrics for participants to complete at their convenience before a specified deadline. For interviews, participants contacted the researchers directly via email to arrange a mutually convenient time and date for an interview using Microsoft Teams.

All survey participants were eligible for entry into a prize draw to win a £25 Amazon voucher. Twenty-five vouchers were available (a maximum of one per participant). All interview participants were given a voucher of this value. Due to the sensitive subject matter, both the survey and interview ended with a debrief sheet explaining the purpose of the study and information on how participants could withdraw their data later, if necessary. They contained signposts to organisations supporting fathers and mental health more generally.

2.3. Analytic Plan

Survey responses and interview transcripts were analysed jointly utilising Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) technique, and their six stages were followed. Due to the volume of information generated, this manuscript focuses only on themes and sub-themes related to fathers' experiences of negotiating co-parenting arrangements, including experiences of family court. Other themes are detailed in the aforementioned published papers.

3. Results

During analysis, three themes related to the impact of FBSD on fathers emerged, each with several sub-themes. These were 'The impact on fathers', 'The impact on children', and 'Coping'.

3.1. Theme 1: The Impact on Fathers

The impact of FBSD on the fathers interviewed can be broadly characterised as a combination of things lost and gained due to the family breakdown.

3.1.1. Sub-Theme 1: Losses

Concerning losses, often the father moved out of the family home following the family breakdown, resulting in "the loss of your home" (P28) as well as everything that comes with that, such as their "valuables and belongings" (P15) and "the loss of time with your kids" (P28). Participants described how they felt they were the ones who had to move out even if their actions were not the reason for the relationship breakdown, as this was the expected thing to happen. Sometimes, the loss of a father's home could lead to the threat of homelessness (see Hine et al. Forthcoming) as they had to move out at any cost. Some fathers resorted to couch surfing, sleeping in their office, or moving back in with their parents:

"[I was] under the roof of my own parents and living in my old bedroom" (P28).

Several fathers remarked on the financial challenge of finding alternative accommodation and the difficulties of paying for housing while "everything is tied up in the family" (P13). Often, fathers also continued to pay rent for their ex-partners months after their split, as well as bills and groceries, even after they had moved out:

"She left me paying for the mortgage on the house that she was living in and paying all of her bills: gas bills, electric bills, you name it. [. . .] And she refused to accept that there was anything wrong with that" (P4).

For some fathers, this was complicated as they acknowledged that they still needed to pay for their children and their welfare. However, others still felt resentful about paying for accommodation from which they were not benefitting. As the ones who moved out, fathers were also tasked with ensuring that authorities deemed their new accommodation suitable for hosting their children. However, often, this was something they could not afford:

"I've got a roof over my head with about enough space to accommodate my children for the next year or two. [. . .] 80% of the time it is too big for my needs with the associated running costs and council tax and so on. [. . .] But it has to be able to accommodate the children. [. . .] All I'm doing is treading water at the moment" (P13).

Fathers also described the family breakdown and the events following as hurting their careers, such as needing to take time off work or moving down to part-time hours. Many fathers felt their work had taken a back seat while they were balancing their jobs with the stress of a split. As a result, many fathers experienced a lack of concentration and focus on work:

"Work suffered. Essentially, I felt like I couldn't concentrate. We were going through a pretty, like, hardass project at the time. And I ended up having to take a step back from that just because what felt like a lot of pressure at home was leaking through into the workplace. And I just, I genuinely couldn't concentrate when I'd be getting like emails from various lawyers or text messages from my ex saying, 'You need to do this or else', kind of thing" (P29).

Moreover, several fathers were now reliant on finding or keeping a job that offered flexibility to see their children and juggle the demands of legal proceedings (Hine et al. 2025b):

"I have struggled to find work that I can fit around the kids and the school day" (P26).

Most fathers interviewed thus described the substantial financial impact of the family breakdown upon them: they found it hard to juggle financial obligations, such as legal costs, living costs, and travel costs to see their children:

"On top of that, you may still be trying to just get your own job done in order to be able to feed yourself. Never mind trying to feed your children, never mind trying to keep the mortgage and the upkeep on the alimony [. . .]. There's too many things for one person to be all happening in the same time frame: solicitor's costs, child maintenance, potentially having to pay your spousal aliment. [. . .] And you're still trying to cram in your own working day. And you don't have anywhere to live, so, you now need rent or a deposit [. . .] so you can just have a roof over your head. [. . .] There's too many things. That's five things I've just listed there that in my case were all happening concurrently" (P13).

Prominent sources of financial loss included personal debts (sometimes owed to their ex-partner), which had paid for legal proceedings and child maintenance. One father was paying for contact through a supervision centre. However, he sadly had to stop due to its negative financial impact, illustrating how finances can be a barrier to fathers maintaining a relationship with their children. As such, many fathers were left in a financial deficit and had to live a frugal lifestyle. Some fathers found themselves in extreme poverty:

"I didn't eat because I didn't have the money to buy food" (P20)"So, three weeks into the month and in theory [. . .] it was likely I'd have my children for two more weekends. [. . .] I've got 47p with which to feed them. So, you're on your knees" (P13).

It is worth noting that there are strong converse narratives in this area, particularly around fathers' payment of child maintenance (or lack thereof) and the financial impact this has on resident mothers (Natalier 2018). Thus, issues with the system and how child maintenance is calculated may harm parents negotiating financial arrangements post-separation.

In addition to the financial effects, several fathers acknowledged that the family breakdown hurt their social life and relationships. Some saw their "whole social life went out the window" (P8) due to "being with the kids all the time" (P26) as a resident parent or by being a non-resident parent having the children "at weekends" (P17), meaning they have little time to socialise. Other fathers reported feeling isolated and cut off from social relationships, partly due to family and friends taking their ex-partner's side or the family breakdown experience having eroded their trust in others:

"There's a period when you give up on humanity and we can't trust anybody. When the person who you're closest to sort of betrays you in this way. It's quite devastating and you think: 'Why did I not see this?' [. . .] You doubt your own judgement of other people" (P3).

This finding is likely exacerbated by the issues already outlined in this paper relating to the availability and depth of men's social relationships (Sherrod 2018) and their reluctance to seek help and support as a contradiction to hegemonic masculinity norms (Connell 2020).

Similarly to social relationships, the potential for new romantic relationships was inhibited by some fathers becoming skeptical of women and lacking trust in relationships. Moreover, some fathers acknowledged that the "baggage" (P30) from their past could "put a dampener" (P20) or be "taxing" (P3) on new relationships, either because new partners would be deterred by the situation and "run for the hills" (P22) or because the father's ex-partner proactively "decimated" (P8) or "destroyed" (P5) potential new relationships. Moreover, some fathers recognised the need for a suitable adjustment period following the family breakdown to wait until they were mentally ready to enter a new relationship:

"I think I'm so busy trying to rebuild me as a person that actually having a relationship with anyone else is nowhere near on the spectrum" (P25).

Other fathers were more optimistic about entering a new relationship and spoke positively about the impact that their new partner had on their lives:

"To me, it wasn't the problem of marriage as an institution [...] because it wasn't marriage's fault, it was the person I was married to in the first instance" (P11).

Taken together, it appears that, while some men harboured valid resentment towards their ex-partners and their behaviour, most losses experienced by fathers post-separation were facilitated or exacerbated by societal and systemic issues, including a lack of support and effective system intervention (Hine et al. 2025b), as well as restrictive masculinity and fatherhood norms reflected in the reactions of their support networks and, also, themselves. This not only placed many fathers in a position of significant loss but created the impression to them that these losses were acceptable and just 'part of life'.

3.1.2. Sub-Theme 2: Mental Health and Suicide

One of the most significant adverse impacts fathers experienced was on their well-being and mental health. This particular effect is unsurprising given the severity of all of the losses discussed above, with most fathers describing the post-separation period as a dark time in their lives:

"I would say that my mental state during the last few months of our relationship [...] it was going downhill then. But then afterwards and all the barriers and speed bumps [...] that didn't help. And then all the financial matters on top of that as well. So, it's like my jar, my pot was getting very, very full and I had no way to release it" (P20).

Although fathers' mental health was severely affected by various aspects of the family breakdown, some fathers singled out the court system in particular as a key trigger:

"I'd like to think of myself as quite resilient. But I've never experienced something that has messed up my mental health than this whole process has done. The breakup was bad. Don't get me wrong. But what's actually messed up my mental health is going through this court system" (P1).

As discussed in Hine et al. (2025b) the potential prejudices held by the family court towards fathers likely underpin this effect as fathers engaged in these systems may feel hopeless in the face of what they perceive to be unjust processes.

In relation to specific mental health diagnoses, fathers testified to having suffered depression and anxiety, as well as PTSD and stress. For some, this contributed to diminished self-esteem and, ultimately, suicide ideation. In all, 13 of the 30 fathers interviewed specifically shared having had some level of suicidal ideation, with two of these fathers then making attempts to end their own lives:

"There were a couple of times where I felt, not that I wanted to kill myself, but I felt so low that I didn't want life to continue" (P17).

"I confronted her with this. There was a bit of an argument. And then I took myself out of the situation and attempted to take my own life" (P7).

These thoughts and attempts were often attributed to a sense of being overwhelmed and lonely, particularly in relation to court proceedings:

"a court day or [when] I get a letter or something, it's just a trigger point" (P1).

Most prominently, however, fathers felt suicidal when their ex-partners attempted to stop any contact with their children:

"When you totally and absolutely love your kids and suddenly that's taken away from you. [...] Imagine somebody [...] marched into your house and [...] take

you away from your kids for no reason whatsoever. Really no reason whatsoever. It's a tremendous shock" (P3).

These testimonials support a growing body of evidence not only on men's increased risk of suicide following FBSD (Evans et al. 2016) but also on how disruption to contact with children (Shiner et al. 2009), including purposeful targeting of this relationship, can influence suicidal ideation (Hine and Bates 2024; Lee-Maturana et al. 2022). Despite this impact, thinking of the children was also typically their saving grace:

"It's difficult to know what stopped me. [...] But it was, I again was thinking of the children. I kind of thought that [...], for me, it would be easier but for the children, it would be devastating, and what happens is they've got to carry that for the rest of their lives. [...] I can't do this to them" (P3).

Many fathers also commented on the likely psychosomatic relationships that existed between the impact of the family breakdown on their mental health and their related deteriorating physical health:

"It's made me really think, have I been kinda holding things back? [...] It's like my body's way of kind of telling me you've been holding on to a lot of the stuff" (P18).

Fathers typically cited stress as being the underlying cause of several emerging issues with their physical health, including lack of sleep, changes in appetite and weight and more:

"I wasted away through separation and divorce. I lost... I was down to about 67 kg, so, you know, 30 odd, just about 30kg of weight loss. Part of that was I couldn't afford to eat. Part of that was I had very little appetite" (P13).

"I am definitely a stress eater [...] I think I put on about ten kilos" (P16).

"I was catching myself waking up in the middle of the night repeatedly [...] grinding my teeth. During the course of divorce, I think I broke five teeth from grinding them. [...] And I couldn't afford to go and see a dentist. So, I've still got five broken teeth in my mouth because, [...] among everything else, I still can't afford to go and get that fixed" (P13).

The relationship between mental and physical health is well established (Ohrnberger et al. 2017), and it is, therefore, no surprise that fathers experiencing such mental distress also found this manifesting physically. Fathers experiencing FBSD face a complicated and often interwoven suite of issues across their minds and bodies.

3.1.3. Sub-Theme 3: Relationships with Children

Arguably, the most significant loss, and the foundation for many of the mental health issues outlined above, was the lost or weakened relationship with their children. A large majority of fathers interviewed enjoyed being a dad and described close, loving relationships with their children before the family breakdown:

"Ever since the moment they were born, I've absolutely adored them both. I have fawned over them. And happily, happily from the moment they wake up to the moment I go to work to the moment I get back to the moment they go to bed". (P21).

In most cases, fathers considered themselves hands-on dads pre-separation, and in some instances, the main carer for the children:

"Very proactive Dad. I was more than happy to do bath times, stinky nappy times. I was more than happy to get up in the middle of the night and do some milk, played with her loads, did loads of reading, did loads of music things..." (P25).

For these fathers in particular, any loss or change to the relationship they held with their children was particularly damaging, as has been previously described in studies with alienated fathers (Bates and Hine 2023). Indeed, with the family breakdown came several losses in relation to the children. Most obviously was the loss of contact, either entirely or in part, while the children were in the mother's care:

"In September, I will reach a point where my son has been living away from me for half of his life" (P9).

"I cry when I don't see her and I get really emotional about it. […] It's usually on a Saturday morning when I get up and I know I'm not going to see her for the day. And I've got no work to do and I've got a day of leisure that Saturdays, I'm very, very vulnerable" (P25).

Fathers also felt that they were losing their fatherhood role, appearing more as "an uncle" (P25), "a friend" (P6), or "a stranger" (P2) as their input and control over their children's lives were reduced alongside their levels of contact:

"We need more time. I'm trying to be his dad but at times he feels I'm his friend. […] He's not with me enough for him to understand that I'm actually his dad. I'm a parent. I've got the same authority as his mother" (P6).

This echoes previous work with fathers (Kruk 1991), as well as work on how this manifests for fathers as a "sense of living grief" (P12), as with every handover came "mourning the loss of your living child every week" (P6):

"I might as well just pretend that they died because it got to the point where I was seeing them so seldom" (P12).

Indeed, many fathers complained that they had missed out on precious time with their children, instead enduring long, drawn-out court processes and/or their ex-partners' alienation or denial of access. It was, thus, a common worry that this time would not be available to them in the future as the children grow up:

"I lost a year of my daughter's life from the court process simply because no one could tell the mum to get her act together" (P16).

Consequently, several fathers were devastated by the of the bond they had with their children before the breakdown caused typically by limited contact or parental alienation:

"When I have seen him, there's a strain. […] He's just been dragged over to one side. […] You can see that there is a relationship that has been lost" (P11).

Fathers commented that the main obstacle to the father–child relationship was absence, either prolonged due to the mother restricting access or temporary while the child was in the mother's care:

"The first time that he hadn't seen me for five months, it took him barely half an hour before he really realised who I was and gave me cuddles and all sorts of things, so that was great" (P6).

Some fathers also commented on the challenge that enforced supervision had on their time with their children:

"[My] ex-wife was trying to stop me from seeing them. She also then was reluctant to choose supervisors. […] It got to, the only people that I could use was my parents who are in their mid-80s. So that put a strain on doing things with my children. You know, I couldn't go to, like, one of those artsy play park things with an 85-year-old man. So, it put a bit of a strain on that" (P7).

Furthermore, some fathers commented that their relationship with their children would significantly benefit from being allowed to spend more time together:

"I just wish that I had more time with her. That's the thing that's holding our relationship back, because I can't do some of the normal, friendly things I want to do with her. I want to take her to the animal park, I want to take her to the beach, I want to take her to the funfair. And time is so limited, that that's just not a possibility at the moment" (P22).

It is thus clear that fathers are deeply affected by challenges and changes to their parenting roles (Kruk 2021), an unsurprising finding when considering how important this role is to many, particularly modern, fathers (Stubley et al. 2015).

3.1.4. Sub-Theme 4: Positivity and Endurance

Despite these challenges, many of the fathers reported an enduring or even strengthened relationship with their children after the family breakdown. This was typically due to having more freedom to be a parent on their terms:

"My relationship with my kids survived it" (P2).

"She is brilliant. We have such a good time together. She is a joy to be around. She's such a happy wee girl. Very rarely cries. Once or twice, she's been a bit unsure about coming for contact, but as soon as she gets a hug from me, she's fine. She's energetic. She loves exploring things. She's just [inaudible]. She loves me reading to her. I just wish that I had more time with her" (P22).

"The bond that we share is very, very strong and seems to have maintained, you know, despite the small level of contact. [...] With everything that I've told you about the barriers in place and the challenges along the way, like, our relationship gets stronger and stronger every week. You know, I treat every contact with such a level of elevation, like, it's so special because of, they're brief and they're rare. [...] And I think he really understands how important the time is. So, he really puts himself into it. [...] In terms of our relationship, in spite of everything, it's great" (P18).

"I think there's a closeness between her and I and between us as a unit that is, it's really special. And I don't know if dads always get that. And I think I'm lucky because I have got it. And wouldn't want to give it up" (P11).

"I am no longer in this position of subordination with my ex-partner. [...] Being, in a way, the family home, her house, her territory, there would still be some, some constraints or routines [...] that would have to be maintained even when she wasn't around. So, to have them in my environment now, [...] I think this is what has helped my relationship with them to improve" (P2).

Outside of the parent–child relationship, some fathers discussed becoming more sociable as the family breakdown allowed them to spend time with friends and family they were not permitted to see during the relationship. Sometimes, this meant reconnecting with previously estranged friends and family members. As a result, some fathers recognised that their social lives improved. Some fathers even made new friends:

"I ended up making some really good friends with the parents. And I think having new friendships that weren't ever to do with my marriage or anything was really, really good for me. Really helped. Like a fresh start" (P26).

Other fathers explained that the experience strengthened family bonds as they had to rely on them for social support through the family breakdown:

"With family, there's been a weird side effect of, because [my ex-partner] insists that I be supervised by my sisters, I've actually gotten to know my sister a lot better. [...] My family has all really pulled around as a result" (P4).

However, it is important to note that these narratives came from a minority of participants, with most fathers stuck in prolonged co-parenting negotiations, facing post-separation abuse, facing financial ruin, and dealing with highly threatened or strained relationships with their children.

3.2. Theme 2: The Impact on Children

When asked how they thought the family breakdown had impacted their children, several fathers emphasised their efforts to protect their children. However, inevitably, there were some unavoidable adverse effects.

3.2.1. Sub-Theme 1: Witnessing Conflict

Several fathers were concerned over the potential negative impact the family breakdown has had or will have on their children. Some of these concerns stemmed from the children having witnessed interparental conflict and/or their father being subjected to abuse:

> "We used to do on Sundays, we did like family days where we would take [our daughter] swimming. [. . .] And then [our daughter]'s mum decided she wanted to come along too to these and made them extremely difficult. You know, she was very abusive during them, very toxic. And then even got to the point where [our daughter] didn't want to go swimming anymore because it was, she found it too difficult" (P16).

Some fathers were also concerned over the potential impact of the repeated intervention from the local authorities in response to false allegations made against the father:

> "I was accused of lying on top of him, which, you know, obviously didn't happen. [. . .] Police turned up at his school, and just checked everything was okay. And I think that's one of the difficulties is, you know, suddenly the children are pulled into this" (P11).

3.2.2. Sub-Theme 2: Negative Emotions and Mental Health

Fathers described their children as predominantly manifesting negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, PTSD, panic attacks, and self-harm, in response to the family breakdown itself during handovers:

> "He's told me straight when I've had to leave as well, that he's crying, bawling. 'Don't leave me. Please don't leave me', that sort of thing. And it breaks my heart obviously to hear that" (P1).

Such findings provide evidence for the cascading effect of FBSD and demonstrate that the negative emotions described in Theme 1 are shared across family members. Several fathers also recognised how the instability for children caused by having "two separate lives, two separate parents" (P28) may cause these reactions and the distress caused by the recurring adjustment required when "toing and froing between the two houses" (P26):

> "Every time they would turn up, they would be quite aggressive, which was never before the case. And it was almost, they had to get some physical tension out of their system, and after that, you will be able to sort of settle down and have a nice time together" (P3).

Several fathers distinguished the impact on their children from alienating behaviours. As a result of one parent's attempts to cut the father out of their lives, children were often left feeling distressed, confused, or guilty:

> "Of course, they want to love both of their parents because that's just natural and normal. You know, 'I want to love Mum. And I want to love Dad.' But now you

don't know what's happening because apparently one of them is terrible, but I don't think they're terrible" (P3).

Previous work has explored men's experiences of false allegations as a form of alienating behaviour (Bates and Hine 2023; Bates and Hine 2023), and there is a substantial body of literature on the impact of such behaviours on children themselves (Miralles et al. 2023). Indeed, this complements extant work on the damaging effects of witnessing any/all parental conflict on children (Sarrazin and Cyr 2007), including the induction of loyalty conflict as suggested in P16's quote above.

These feelings mounted to increased tantrums as well as signs of anxiety and co-dependency on the alienating parent:

> "She struggled an awful lot being away from her mum, not because she missed her mum, but because she was just always worried about her mum. [...] She tried to let herself out the house to walk back to her mum's house because she really needed to be with her mum. She couldn't cope" (P16).

There were also interesting age effects. Many of the fathers, whose children were very young during the family breakdown, suggested that the family breakdown may not have impacted them much at all due to their young age or the breakdown occurring very soon after the birth of their child, with children, therefore, shielded from any negative impact given they were "too young to sort of comprehend what's going on" (P27) and "it's all she's ever known" (P22), therefore "he doesn't necessarily know what he's missing" (P18):

> "And I hope because she was only 18 months, two years old, that maybe she just sees it as, dare I use the word, normal?" (P25).

In contrast, fathers considered their older children more vulnerable to negative impact as they were more likely to be "aware of what's going on" (P7).

3.3. Theme 3: Coping

In response to the experiences described in theme 1, fathers had to find ways to cope, some 'unhealthy' and some 'healthy'. They also sought both informal and formal support, with mixed success.

3.3.1. Sub-Theme 1: 'Maladaptive Coping'

Alcohol was by far the most popular 'unhealthy' coping strategy, adopted by nearly half the sample of fathers. Although they were keen to express that they did not go overboard into a serious problem:

> "If I didn't drink, then I didn't sleep. I was just too wired. So, that became a mechanism" (P26).

> "I probably drank a bit more alcohol. I was never, sort of, dependent or anything. I wasn't unhealthy, but I was probably drinking a bit more alcohol as well" (P28).

Around a quarter of fathers coped through having a bad diet:

> "Even to this day, I think eating can, for me, it can be an unhealthy coping mechanism because it's a comfort for me" (P18).

A few fathers also reported smoking and overworking as unhealthy coping strategies:

> "The unhealthiest was starting to smoke again. I've since quit" (P20).

> "I started smoking for a little while, which was a habit I started during that breakdown period and post-separation and I gave that up" (P28).

> "My coping strategy was just going to work. [...] So, I put all my focus and energy into work, quite frankly" (P1).

"Working too much" (P29).

These behaviours represent stereotypical externalising strategies by men that may mask internalised problems (Pappas 2019). It is important to note that to others, including support networks and services, these behaviours often seem self-destructive, wild, and erratic and may discourage intervention, but they may, in fact, demonstrate when help is most needed.

3.3.2. Sub-Theme 2: 'Healthy Coping'

Encouragingly, more than two-thirds of the fathers interviewed cited exercise as a healthy coping strategy as it helped their mental health and countered the bad diet used by some fathers as an unhealthy coping mechanism:

> "So, sort of physical exercise, I would use that time to think about things and try and think things through when I was walking rather than thinking things through during the night and it affecting my sleep" (P22).

Alternatively, around one-third of fathers engaged in hobbies or leisure activities as a coping mechanism. This was particularly valuable for fathers whose ex-partners prohibited such recreational activities during their relationship:

> "Engage in more mindful exercises, the likes of reading and painting" (P18).

Fathers also reported finding the outdoors, mindfulness, and meditation, and helping others as well as socialisation and therapy as effective coping strategies:

> "The only way I can really disconnect is when I'm working or when I'm away, [...] I do a lot of trekking. [...] And that's been my way to escape from all of this" (P8).

> "I'm a really big fan of meditation now [...] just to help calm my mind down. I found it particularly useful for helping me to get to sleep at night [...] because I think that's when I'm at my worst is nighttime, [...] it's sort of like a way of breaking out of that negative spiral in a healthy manner. And then, you know, once you're able to sleep again, it makes such a huge difference in helping you climb out of the massive hole that you've been put in" (P30).

These findings demonstrate that, as much as it is important to apply a gendered lens in understanding men's coping mechanisms, these perspectives are not all-encompassing and that men as unique individuals will gravitate towards different strategies depending on a wide array of other factors.

3.3.3. Sub-Theme 3: Informal Support

When participants sought support, those who contacted informal sources found mostly positive responses. Fathers reported receiving support from a combination of family, friends, a new partner, their boss, and colleagues, as well as neighbours and other parents in their neighbourhood:

> "A couple other friends were just there to speak to. It was good. I was lucky. I don't think I would have been in such a good mental state of mind if I didn't have a couple of very switched-on people to speak to" (P24).

> "It's strengthened my family bonds, so, particularly my relationship with my mum has been acutely helpful in the situations that I've been in. So, I have a lot of family support" (P17).

> "At work even. A lot of my colleagues have been very supportive" (P2).

Thus, in contrast to the assumptions from the literature that fathers may not have a sophisticated network of support to turn to, men drew great strength from those around them. Contrary again to the extant literature on hegemonic masculinity expectations (Connell 2020), fathers received predominantly emotional support from their social networks:

"But just, I think, just a lot of validation from family and friends, you know, in terms of... 'You're right to feel like this way'" (P16).

Alongside emotional support, many fathers received "practical support for getting on with life" (P30), such as financial support, accommodation, and assistance with childcare:

"They've always sort of helped me out in terms of finance and, God knows where I'd be without them, essentially, because it felt like a tight rope at that point" (P29).

Some fathers appreciated socialising with their friends and family:

"I had a friend who his wife would come look after the kids, and then we'd go out for a beer. And that was really, really good. I needed that" (P26).

Moreover, some fathers also recalled being referred to professional support by family members when needed:

"My sister pointed me in the right direction towards professional support" (P18).

However, despite many fathers speaking positively about the social support they received, they also identified several barriers that deterred them from asking for help. Most commonly, fathers did not want to be a burden to others:

"But there's only so much burden you can put on friends and people who have got their own shit going on" (P28).

Alternatively, they were embarrassed or ashamed about the breakdown of the relationship and how it was affecting them:

"I was embarrassed. I didn't want to say anything to anybody. Didn't want to tell anybody where I was living, the way I was being controlled" (P14).

These findings reflect the internalised masculinity norms associated with stoicism and independence, which then characterise help-seeking as showing vulnerability or weakness (Connell 2020). Other fathers perceived others to be ignorant or found that others lacked understanding of what they were going through:

"These people are living in a bubble that is not exposed to what people like us are going through [...] unless you've gone through this whole experience, you know, people have no idea" (P8).

Moreover, therefore, they could only do so much to help:

"[They] didn't have anything to tell me that would make me feel better [...] nice words are not enough to undo the damage that's an angry ex-partner" (P2).

Some of the fathers' social networks were also distanced, either geographically or emotionally, due to burnt bridges during the relationship with their ex-partner:

"I had no contact with family, my family live abroad, I felt extremely isolated" (P3).

There are, therefore, clearly mixed experiences from fathers of seeking support from social networks. These experiences are deeply enmeshed with men's understanding of their masculinity and the acceptability of vulnerability in today's society, particularly following the perceived 'failure' of family breakdown.

3.3.4. Sub-Theme 4: Professional Support

Positively, most fathers reported receiving some professional psychological support, such as counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), with around one-third of interviewed fathers explaining they received professional support through work:

"I went to the GP and they referred me to a CBT course to basically stop me from jumping off a bridge. That was amazing. That really was a turning point. [...] That got me through the end of the relationship and the moving out of my daughter, that got me through that and getting me to stop thinking about negative thoughts all the time and start to, like, be a lot more positive" (P25).

"Work arranged for psychotherapy for me, which was very good. Which I think probably saved me" (P14).

Some fathers also stated they were taking or had taken prescribed mental health medication. However, several more were reticent and declined to take medication to alleviate the mental health impact:

"I had a breakdown with my neighbours. They rang the doctor's. I saw the doctor that afternoon. So, I'm now on antidepressants. I'm 53 years old. I've never had antidepressants in my life. I don't want to be on them. I tried to not take them for a day, and that feeling came back. My stomach turned, I get a thing in my throat comes up, I start shaking, I feel physically sick. So, I took them and I've not stopped taking them since I got them, which is maybe four or five weeks ago" (P21).

"My GP was very happy to offer me all these different drugs. I didn't want any of those, thank you. [...] I don't want to take drugs to mask the symptoms and not do anything about the causes. So, I've never, ever taken any medication" (P10).

These findings align with previous findings regarding men's general engagement with healthcare services, specifically their overall reluctance (Mursa et al. 2022). Reassuringly, however, it appears that general practitioners were receptive to men's struggles and made appropriate recommendations, even if men were reluctant to act upon these.

Around two-thirds of participants reported seeking support from a charitable organisation, for example, for divorced or separated fathers or for male survivors of domestic abuse. They discussed attending support groups and courses or calling a helpline provided by these organisations:

"I also spoke to [ANONYMOUS] who have now changed their name and they're [ANONYMOUS]. They were a godsent really. I'm still going to their monthly meetings and they've really helped guide me through the process and make things quite a bit easier" (P22).

"I got in touch with [ANONYMOUS]. And they, well, the fact that I'm still here and I'm still alive, that's down to them. But they were incredibly supportive emotionally and mentally as well, they were fab" (P25).

"The other really good thing that I would recommend was [ANONYMOUS] and I did a Surviving Separation course. That was really helpful" (P27).

The majority of fathers reported that the professional help they received helped provide them with emotional support, particularly therapy providing strategies for healthily regulating emotions:

"The CBT therapists talked to me about various things in my past and how that relates to the person that I am today, which was quite helpful in understanding

myself better. But I think some of the most useful things that I've taken from it are [...] CBT techniques to help calm the mind" (P30).

Fathers also received pragmatic help in the form of problem-solving with a mentor or educational books or support through the court process:

"So, I've got a mentor at [ANONYMOUS] and she's been really great. So, she can advise on some of the legal stuff. She can look through the court papers and stuff and, you know, she's just got experience of what the likely ways to respond to that are. She's not a solicitor, she's not a lawyer, but she's seen enough of these things to be able to give advice on it" (P4).

Fathers also spoke about how the professional support offered opportunities for meeting others going through similar experiences, which helped them gain perspective, feel less alone, and recognise and validate their own abuse experiences:

"It was just amazing to find out that it wasn't just me. I thought it was only me. And there were all these other guys from all different walks of life and every, you know, all different shapes, sizes, ethnicities, you name it. But our stories were all so ridiculously similar, and the tactics that had been used against us were all so ridiculous and similar. And it was really quite mind-blowing" (P10).

Nevertheless, fathers identified several barriers to seeking and accessing professional support. Some attributed this to poor signposting, while others believed it was because such services were lacking:

"There's just no support out there for dads and for men in particular" (P16).

This challenge was intensified by the fact that fathers do not typically receive any statutory support following a split:

"Dads don't really get much support whenever they leave the family home. If a relationship ends and you're under 35, you have no duty to be rehoused. You effectively have to house yourself. And often that means a house share. And then if you house share, then that's used as an excuse by a lot of ex-partners to stop people from seeing their kids. [...] The council, [...] they give you a shared room rate, which effectively is like you're only able to afford a house share" (P16).

As a result of not finding the right support, some fathers recalled experiences where services failed to offer adequate or any support for their situation:

"I've tried to reach out to, like, the various helplines. It was a very disappointing experience. [...] The guy said: 'Okay, go on, speak' and then after 20 min he said: 'Okay, well, that was 20 min. Thank you. Bye'. And I couldn't believe like how... Like he couldn't give less of a shit" (P2).

Several fathers recognised that services were overburdened and struggling to stay afloat, therefore lacking capacity, which resulted in long waiting times:

"I kind of went to the bottom of the waitlist and it took a year for me to get a call back from them" (P16).

"There's an 18-month NHS waiting list to see a psychologist" (P10).

Some fathers described that they were not able to receive support from specific organisations because they did not meet the correct demographic criteria (e.g., gender, sexuality), especially domestic abuse services, which were not open to men in some cases:

"Particularly as a dad as well. Like, I just felt invisible, like, it's all single mums, there was nothing for dads" (P26).

Some fathers also discussed feeling shame or embarrassment in asking for help:

"As a man, you just feel like you've got to do it on your own" (P26).

Moreover, some feared that their ex-partner would use it against them if they received professional help:

"There was a big barrier because I was worried, that anything, if I expressed too much about any problems I was having mentally, that it would be turned and used against me [by my ex-partner]. So, there was a big barrier. So, I couldn't get the full support I wanted or needed at the time. I had to shoulder a lot of it. [...] I felt that any aspect of mental health could be seen as being a risk" (P17).

Many of these findings echo previous observations made about services for men, for example, in the domestic violence sector (Bates and Douglas 2020), in that they are often not constructed in a gender-inclusive manner and are few and far between or chronically underfunded. These results demonstrate a desperate need for more effective services for men experiencing FBSD.

4. Discussion

This study concludes the holistic examination of fathers' experiences of a family breakdown outlined in two previous papers (Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b), with a specific focus on the impact of a family breakdown, including abuse and negotiating co-parenting arrangements, as well as their coping mechanisms. Findings demonstrate that fathers experience significant challenges to their mental health following FBSD, principally related to the 'losses' they face.

Theme 1 explored the various losses that fathers endure, which were typically related to their identity as fathers and the practical administration of the father's role. Specifically, they spoke of a 'sense of living grief' associated with their lack of contact and that this was particularly challenging for fathers who had previously been close with their children. They also spoke about the significant financial losses faced, either from drawn-out court proceedings (Hine et al. 2025a) or the impact of FBSD on their ability to work. Most importantly, fathers spoke about the profound mental health impact that FBSD had on them as a cumulation of the many losses they faced. This supports previous work that, in isolation, has identified the impact of divorce (Braver et al. 2013; Millings et al. 2020), abuse (Coker et al. 2002; Hine et al. 2020), and alienating behaviours on men (Hine and Bates 2024), with the present study highlighting a convergence of these issues.

Theme 2 showed how fathers interpreted the effect of FBSD on their children, though it should be noted that for some fathers, this was conjecture due to limited contact. Nonetheless, important observations that children experienced mental health issues and concerns that they witnessed violence were provided by fathers. This supports a wealth of evidence demonstrating an association between family breakdown and poor outcomes in children (Amato 2000; Amato and Dorius 2010; Auersperg et al. 2019; Frimmel et al. 2024; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2002; Kelly and Emery 2003), as well as for children as witnesses to abuse (Stiller et al. 2022; Wood and Sommers 2011).

Theme 3 demonstrated the variety of ways fathers coped with the FBSD process, with some engaging in 'healthy' behaviours, including exercise and meditation, and others in 'maladaptive' behaviours, including substance use and overeating. This supports previous work on FBSD generally (Treloar 2019) and on parents coping with high-conflict divorce and parental alienation (Lee-Maturana et al. 2020; Poustie et al. 2018). Crucially, men reported engaging in most of these behaviours alone, potentially in line with restrictive masculine stereotypes that encourage men to be 'lone wolves' and deal with their issues in isolation (Connell 2020). This represents a possible increased risk of highly adverse outcomes, such as suicide completion, due to a lack of emotional outlet. This being said, it should also be noted that men spoke positively of their support networks in this study, a

finding that seemingly goes against previous literature in this area (Evans et al. 2016; Joiner et al. 2012; Scourfield and Evans 2014). They also spoke of the support offered formally, when available, from their workplaces and charitable organisations, which, again, appeared more positive than in some previous work (i.e., on male victims of DVA; Bates and Douglas 2020).

The implications of this study principally focus on how to best support fathers experiencing FBSD as recommendations for addressing the root causes of the issues are outlined in previous work (Hine et al. 2025a, 2025b). The results from this study suggest a desperate need for effective support programmes for fathers that specifically help them stay connected with others. As outlined in Hine et al. (2025b), technological solutions are already being developed to enable separated parents to communicate and organise their responsibilities (i.e., the SeparatingBetter app in the UK). Could there, perhaps, be a similar solution specifically for fathers seeking support after FBSD that would link them to others in their position and provide them with a sense of community with others who understand their experiences as fathers specifically? Any such solution should be sure to shape the user experience in a gender-inclusive and sensitive way (Hine 2025). An additional recommendation is that mental and physical health services should be aware of the vulnerabilities post-FBSD fathers face and be equipped to support them through severe strains on their health and identity. This applies across various professions, including social work and legal spheres, to adequately train and understand the challenges fathers face post-separation and how they, as part of systems and institutions, reinforce these challenges.

As outlined in Hine et al. (2025a, 2025b), there are several important limitations to recognise when interpreting the results of this study, including a self-selecting sample and a sequential recruitment process from survey to interview. However, an additional limitation specific to this manuscript concerns participant reporting of the impact of FBSD on their children. Many of the fathers in this study, due to their position as separated fathers, had limited and sometimes no contact with their children and so were conjecting on the child's (ren's) experiences. Future research might seek to interview children directly about their experiences, including when they are involved in family court processes or are subject to alienating behaviours. Other future research directions include exploring the perspective of service providers in supporting these men and exploring various demographic and cultural factors that may shape experiences (i.e., ensure this area is explored through an intersectional lens).

5. Conclusions

Fathers, like many separated parents, face significant challenges in the aftermath of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD), particularly when navigating co-parenting arrangements and the family court system. The findings from this study highlight how gender stereotypes, systemic biases, and practical barriers exacerbate fathers' struggles, often leaving them disadvantaged in co-parenting negotiations. These experiences underline the urgent need for tailored support for fathers post-separation, with a focus on reducing bias and improving the fairness of legal and social service interventions in FBSD cases. Addressing these issues is crucial for ensuring better outcomes for fathers and their children.

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