

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BABY AND YOUR MARRIAGE

By Catherine McCall, MS, LMFT

Having a healthy baby is one of life's peak experiences, but the first weeks and months after birth are a period of major readjustment for both parents and baby. John Gottman, a leading marital dynamics researcher, reports that 67% of couples experience stress, profound conflict, and drops in marital satisfaction during this time, all of which affect baby's care. Men and women who enter the transition to parenthood with fewer romantic and exaggerated expectations are more likely to emerge happier about their marriages and their spouses (Belsky & Kelly). Though it's difficult to imagine ahead of time how completely your baby will dominate and alter your marriage, acquainting yourself with predictable scenarios can help equip you with realistic expectations.

This article describes normal adjustment issues that arise for many couples, and offers suggestions to help you strengthen your marital bond. Read it and discuss your reactions with your spouse. Make plans now, while the house is still quiet, for what strategies you will develop to handle the normal, predictable stresses ahead of you. Create a culture of respect, understanding, support, and affection in your family. Work as a team. Your marital relationship will fuel the days ahead, and set the tone for your precious child's development.

LOVE

Two people usually decide to get married because they love each other, enjoy being together, and want to share their lives. What disturbs marital bliss is stress of one kind or another, with the greatest stress being the loss or addition of a family member. Having a baby

creates intense stress because it challenges a couple to be together in a different way, while adjusting to noise, sleep deprivation, and lack of solitude.

New parents can feel totally knocked out after only a few days at home with the baby and shocked by what infancy does to you. You may:

- * have ambivalent feelings of loving *and* resenting the baby at the same time
- * feel your psychological and emotional lives shifting
- * notice old wounds from relationships with your own parents resurfacing
- * long for the days when it was just the two of you
- * panic at the new responsibilities and feel an urge to flee
- * wonder why, rather than feeling closer, you feel more distant from your spouse

- * “loose yourself” in your parenting role
- * experience your baby differently from how your spouse does
- * feel pulled into traditional roles
- * feel challenged as never before, and proud to have achieved this major

milestone

Empathize with each other. When your partner is venting, don't try to fix the situation or talk him or her out of troublesome feelings. Just listen and understand. By supporting each other this way, you offer the most effective support.

Protect each other, especially during the early weeks when you're physically drained. Don't hesitate to limit visitors and phone calls. Consider leaving an outgoing message on your answering machine with information you choose to share including when you may be ready for

visitors. Gently but firmly, tell those who place demands on you that you need them to respect this sensitive time. Find support among extended family and friends. Tell those close to you what you need. Perhaps they can help with cleaning up, grocery shopping, or meals.

Remember, everyone needs help when they have a baby.

Your infant needs you to get to know him or her as an individual. Respect your child as a person, and understand that new babies cry a lot. It doesn't mean that they don't like you or that you've done something wrong. They're just trying to tell you what they need and it will take time for you to figure it out. Be patient with the baby and with each other. This is new for all three of you. Try to rest whenever you can, keep talking to your partner, and keep a sense of humor. You're both learning how to be good parents.

MOMMY AND DADDY

A woman's sense of self expands to include the baby as pregnancy progresses. When she nurses the baby, burps it, changes its diaper, rocks it to sleep, her inner world is changing. A new mother can feel overwhelmed, and yet tied to her baby by numerous biological and psychological strands. All of this, even when it feels confusing and chaotic, helps shift her identity into that of mother. Physically and emotionally drained, she needs support, praise, rest and devoted care so that she can conserve her strength and give attention to the baby.

But Dad's experience is different. He can attend prenatal classes, rub his wife's back and feed her crushed ice during labor, hold her hand while the baby's head crowns or during a cesarean birth, and feel a surge of ecstasy when he sees their baby for the first time, but biologically he's an outsider. And once Mom and baby come home from the hospital, he's displaced by a demanding infant who does not yet smile, make eye contact, or reach out and hug

him. He may have a tough time managing feelings of jealousy or anger that their baby has taken his wife away, but managing those feelings presents him with the opportunity to mature into parenthood and a deeper understanding of marital love.

Moms, rest as often as possible and eat nutritionally sound meals and snacks. Be patient with yourself and your husband. Accept help, however clumsy it may seem. Share your feelings, and realize that in spite of differences you and your husband may experience, you both want what is best for your baby. As your body recovers from pregnancy and delivery, physical and hormonal changes may intensify your emotions. You may experience some degree of postpartum depression. If you can't shake feelings of anxiety, sadness, hopelessness or disinterest tell your husband and ask him to help you. Seek immediate medical attention if you experience hallucinations, delusions, or thoughts of hurting yourself or others.

Of course, your baby has considerable influence on how things will go. If an infant is appealing and easy to handle it's easier for the parents. If the baby is colicky and requires a great deal of care and patience, both of you will be exhausted and resentful at times.

Both women and men are still socialized to believe that mothers have special inborn or intuitive child care skills and that all children need a mother as primary parent. This sets moms up to feel central but overburdened, and dads to feel one-down and somewhat defensive. It also creates a dangerous marital dynamic of leading parallel lives rather than functioning as a team. In actuality, though many women do have intuitive skills, most acquire child care skills from the trial and error of day to day experience, and it is important for dads to develop these skills also. You can begin now, by taking baby care classes at the hospital, by attending a "Bringing Baby Home" workshop, by reading, and by watching and talking to other new parents. If you have good relationships with your own parents, turn to them for advice also.

BABY

For your baby, birth is the rupture of the state of biological oneness with Mom. Keep in mind that during the first six weeks your infant will be in a state of limbo between two totally different environments and needs tender attention, patient feeding, gentle touch, and secure holding, to help mend the rupture. Mom and baby will try to work at getting to know each other in a way that will replace physical oneness with psychological oneness so that, with Mom (and Dad and other mothering figures in your baby's life) closely attuned to her/his needs, s/he can develop a sense of self and feel safe enough to explore the world. You want to help your baby build a strong attachment to you.

The newborn's out-of-the-womb environment is full of unfamiliar stimuli-- sights, sounds, smells, temperatures, movements -- which s/he experiences in a disorganized, fragmented way. Only the rocking of Mom's body and her heartbeat are vaguely familiar. You'll notice that during the first weeks home your baby seems unaware of certain stimuli. Many of an infant's reflexes help to shut out sights and sounds that are too disturbing. As the weeks go on, however, this natural barrier becomes much more permeable. Most infants become irritable and fussy between the fourth and twelfth week of life. Thus, from four weeks until your infant is more capable of regulating intake of stimulation, Mom and Dad must do it for her or him. Let your baby educate you.

INTIMACY

Dads, keep in mind that it takes about 6 weeks for your partner to feel better after having a baby. Hug her a lot. Tell her she's doing a great job. Feeding time need not be a time when you feel totally excluded. If your wife is breast feeding, you can bring her the baby and help them get comfortable. Change diapers, give baths, rock the baby, cuddle the baby, read to the baby, and sing the baby to sleep. Know that your presence, touch and voice are very important to both your wife and your infant. They need you. Stay aware of your feelings. If you put a lid on them, you'll find it more difficult to share emotional support with your wife. Being in touch with your feelings will also help you develop a close relationship with your baby.

The birth of a baby is typically when sex goes out the window for a while. Men often experience sexual excitement at the sight of their wives enlarged breasts nursing their infant. But a woman's body needs weeks to heal and her sex drive is greatly diminished. Though gyn's assure women who have had an episiotomy that the pain will disappear in 6-12 weeks, it does not always do so.

Of course, you need to refrain from sex until you get the doctor's OK and Mom is comfortable, but sexual problems linger too long for many new parents. Time becomes a rare commodity and couples miss the spontaneity they may have previously enjoyed. Men often complain of the decrease in frequency, while new mothers complain of exhaustion. Some women believe so deeply that being a wife and mother means that you're supposed to live for others, that they can't allow themselves to experience sexual pleasure. And some men have a problem with the idea that a mother is also a sexual human being. Many couples lose the intimacy of their marital bed by getting in the habit of allowing their baby to sleep with them, even well beyond the time when the baby is sleeping through the night.

Sex is often the barometer of a relationship. Contact a licensed marriage therapist if you

become discouraged about your sex life.

CONFLICTS

Remember that during the first few months after your baby comes home you are both at your most vulnerable to feeling rejected, hurt, and unappreciated for your heroic efforts. If you're sensitive and responsive to each other before your baby is born, you'll realize that the hardships and deprivations of infant care are temporary and you'll experience mutual love for and pride in your baby. Chances are, however, that you'll also experience conflict along the way.

As we enter each new stage of family life issues from our own families of origin and from society's dictates get stirred up. Family legacies -- themes, triangles, taboos, ghosts, roles -- go to work on the subconscious, creating a new kind of anxiety that can keep a person from acting freely and lovingly. Resolving these impasses requires a sincere search into the emotional and social legacies that created our positions, an assessment of what is meaningful to us in the present, and an embrace of change that is deep enough to fuel our growth.

Many couples' conflicts center around family. Take time now to think and talk about your relationships with parents and in-laws -- when a baby is born so are grandparents and aunts and uncles. Emotions can run high, unsolicited opinions can create tension, and varying agendas can create problems. Get on the same page regarding how to handle different relatives. *Before* labor is the time to decide your game plan. Who, if anyone, do you want to be at the hospital when your baby is born? What kind of visitation will you need in the hospital after the baby is born? What about after the homecoming? Granted, you may revise some of your plans as events progress, but it's still a good idea to have basic strategies in place.

CONCLUSION

Couples rarely come to marital therapy before they have children because until then it's easier for their relationships to work. There's more equality. But when the first baby arrives they quickly discover that the world isn't organized to allow them to remain equal, and they find themselves reacting to their new roles as parents in surprising ways. "I never thought I'd feel like this," a new mother with a successful career may exclaim. "But I want to stay home with my baby." New dad's often talk about how anxious they feel about their financial responsibilities. Even though the 2-paycheck family is now the US norm, the added pressure of having a child makes your lives much more complex.

Who's job comes first? Who does what for the child? What are the expectations of your families and how do they affect you? Your marriage? If you both work what will you do about child care? How will these choices affect baby's development? These are tough questions and they're compounded by the inflexibility of the workplace and the growing number of hours of work in the lives of both women and men. But you need to discuss them, knowing that the answers may shift over time, and you need to come to mutually acceptable resolutions or you'll spend the majority of your child rearing years angry at each other.

Remember that parenting is only part of marriage. Good parenting also involves maintaining your marriage and setting aside your roles as parents at regular intervals so that you can continue to be friends and lovers. Seek professional help if you get stuck. Carl Whitaker, one of the grandfathers of the profession of marriage and family therapy and himself father of six

children, used to say that the end result of parenting is not the children but the parents. Your baby will deliver your marriage into fertile territory for your personal growth. It will hold challenges and opportunities. Let parenting teach you both how to become better lovers.

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