

## Preserving Intimacy When Baby Comes

Bringing a newborn baby home can be the most exciting event in a couples' life. It is a special day every parent can remember. It is a time full of great joy. At the same time, the arrival of a baby brings dramatic changes to the marriages for all couples. After the initial excitement, comes the loss of personal time and sleep. Your time is no longer your own. Feeding, burping, diaper changing, soothing, rocking, more crying to sooth, housework, sleep deprivation-you're at the mercy of your baby's schedule.

For many couples of newborns, that initial joy can be fleeting. It also can take its toll on a marriage. Research on couples with first born babies shows that marital relationship satisfaction drops dramatically for two-thirds of couples in the first three years after baby arrives. Conflict within the relationship and hostility dramatically increases. Couples find themselves fighting with each other much more. Their emotional intimacy deteriorates. They become more bewildered and exhausted. They are sleep deprived. Not surprisingly, their passion, sex life, and romance plummet.

Paul and his wife of three years, Melissa, have a 4-month-old son, Andrew. The couple always dreamed of having children. But, the baby brought both bliss and blues. "One day you're pregnant and everything's so great," Melissa said. "And the next day, everything's complete chaos." While Melissa said she knew having a baby would alter her relationship, she didn't know how much.

"People can tell you that it's hard, and they can tell you that it's going to change your relationship, but it's not until you're doing it that you start to realize how true that is," she said. "The euphoria's worn off, and your tiredness sets in. And so, right about 9 o'clock every night for a good week or two weeks, I would cry. And it was awful to feel that way."

While about 15% of women in Canada have full blown postpartum depression, about fifty to 80 percent of mothers have some symptoms. But

mothers aren't the only parents susceptible to this. Thirty percent of fathers have symptoms similar to postpartum depression, according to Relationship Research Institute director John Gottman. He says many parents feel ashamed and embarrassed about their troubled feelings and that in the past the extent of the problem was under reported. Depression of any type puts a strain on relationships.

So what is happening to the babies when so many parents are in distress? Plenty of studies show that babies raised in unhappy homes lag behind babies raised in happy family environments. Speech development, toilet training and the ability to self-soothe are slower to form in these children.

The message for all young parents is clear. The greatest gift a parent can give their baby is a loving relationship because that relationship nourishes the baby. Fortunately lots of parents are getting help.

### **Tips for Preserving Intimacy When Baby Arrives**

In his book *And Baby Makes Three*, John and Julie Gottman outline what their phenomenally successful *Bringing Baby Home* Workshop teaches. The two-day course prepares a couple for how their relationship will change once a baby arrives. It claims that the workshop cuts the marital dissatisfaction rate from 67 percent to 23 percent for couples in the critical three years after the birth. The workshop includes everything from lectures to a fun card game designed to test how well couples really know one another. They're taught how to remain calm during inevitable conflicts, and how something as simple as a 15-minute massage can increase intimacy. Here is a summary of the seven main points taught.

#### **1. Realize we are all in the same soup**

The challenges, the stresses, the hassles, the extra work, and the joys too are the ingredients of the soup that all couples with babies find themselves in. There is no way to eliminate them. They are the natural part of becoming parents. Increasing awareness of the ingredients while keeping our relationships healthy can nourish babies and fortify the family.

## **2. Delight in your baby**

Touch, massage, raising voice pitch, repeating words, baby talk, singing, playing, cuddling all help strengthen the natural biological and social attachment process between parent and child. Babies are fascinated by play. It is a great adventure for them. It can be a tremendous joy and delight for parents too.

## **3. Cool down your conflicts**

When exhausted, we are more prone to quarrel. To keep the conflict respectful and not hurtful, it is best to manage conflict in the following ways:

- a. Soften how you bring up a problem. When the discussion begins harshly with criticism, defensiveness, contempt or stonewalling (silent when angry) the conversation is going to be hurtful and unproductive. Instead say what you feel, describe the problem neutrally, say what you need, (not what you don't need).
- b. Accept influence: there are two sides to every fight. Learn to state your partner's point of view to his or her satisfaction to ensure that each one feels understood. This helps to set the stage to influence and be influenced.
- c. Calm down by self-soothing. During conflict, our adrenalin and stress hormone cortisol is instinctively released as part of a diffuse physiological arousal. Heart rates of men increase faster than women's and take longer to return to normal. Men need to be alone to calm down. Women often want to stay connected and resolve issues immediately. The solution is to take a break from the quarrel and agree to get together later. In the meantime, take a walk, listen to music and reflect on what a good person your partner is and how you can better understand each other.

- d. Compromise. For each of you, define the smallest core area of need you cannot yield on, what you have to have. Then state areas of greater flexibility, or when and how you each can get what you need. Finally, come up with a temporary compromise to test out.
  - e. Repair the injuries caused. Successful couples apologize and accept each other's repair attempts. Unsuccessful couples ignore the hurt they have inflicted and hold grudges.
  - f. In the aftermath of a fight, process and understand it. Each of you can discuss your feelings and points of view, admit your role in the argument and discuss how to make things better in future.
  - g. Accept that there are "unsolvable problems". All couples find recurrent issues that come up time and again and can cause communication gridlock. Successful couples find their way through this by accepting the feelings and values of their partner and looking to the future rather than the past.
4. **Savour your friendship.** Know your partners' inner world what they are passionate about. Learn what their life dreams are. Express appreciation, affection and admiration. Turn toward your partner when they make a bid for attention or emotional connection.
5. **Heat up your sex life.** There is a dramatic drop in the sex life of most couples when baby arrives and sexual desire does not return easily. Sex is an important part of strengthening a marriage. The following are the secrets of couples who are successful in bringing a healthy sex life back. Accept that things have changed. Ask each other for sex. Talk about what feels good sexually and make it better. Express non sexual affection, especially with touch. Men slow down... way down, talk first, help your wife feel beautiful and loved, and caress her slowly. Women reciprocate by telling your man how great he is. Quickies are as important as gourmet sex. Masturbation together or

- alone is acceptable when not kept secret from your partner. Share innermost fantasies. Discuss innermost feelings and don't avoid conflict. Make gourmet sex a priority and make time for it.
6. **Add warm fathering.** One of the best predictors of a child's empathy in adulthood is a father's involvement when they were 5 years old. Actively involved fathers who play with their infants predicts higher more intellectually verbally advanced children later. Increased time spent by fathers with baby is highest when there is low conflict with mother, constructive conflict resolution, intimacy between parents, and when fathers have the skills to help with baby.
  7. **Create a legacy.** Successful couples transform their sense of identity from *me* to *we* when baby arrives. Teamwork is strengthened. Traditions from their own family and culture are borrowed and new ones are created. Everyday events take on special meaning as a new family history is created. The establishment of holiday traditions, goals, new roles, a balance between work and family and strengthening of shared values and beliefs help deepen our lives with meaning together.

*For more information about the Bringing Baby Home Project, visit*  
[www.bbhonline.org](http://www.bbhonline.org)