



Sleep, sex and sacrifice

The transition to parenthood,
a testing time for relationships?

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Authors

Dr Catherine Houlston

Dr Lester Coleman

Lynne Milford

Nancy Platts

Penny Mansfield

 **oneplusone**
Strengthening relationships

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New research contained in this report is from an ICM survey of 1,403 parents, including 512 new parents who have one child under the age of three. The research was carried out in April 2013. ICM also hosted an online community followed by focus groups to gather qualitative data.

A Message From The Director

Relationships matter to us - when we are getting on and not under stress they make us happy and healthy. A strong relationship with someone we love and trust is what most people seek. But it is rarely straightforward.

There is a school of thought that says if a relationship “is meant to be” then it will work out whatever happens - it’s fate. In fact relationships develop as the partners change and circumstances alter; thought, effort, and negotiation are required if they are to remain strong.

Becoming parents is one of life’s big events. As our survey shows it is not an easy transition and nothing can fully prepare you for the changes you will go through when a small, vulnerable and very demanding person enters your lives. A baby’s arrival can disrupt, even weaken the relationship that should cradle their upbringing.

Lack of sleep, sex and time together as a couple - disrupt new parents’ relationships often provoking heightened emotions, tension and arguments. If a relationship is strong and the couple are committed to working together, their new roles as parents can be fun, exciting and very rewarding. Renegotiating your partnership with the new roles and responsibilities can be testing but if you stay close and know how to manage your differences then the path can be much smoother.

Communication is vital in any relationship. It can be hard to ask a grumpy partner what’s wrong – especially when you fear they think it’s your fault. Many of our survey respondents say how important it is for parents to talk to each other and to make time for themselves as a couple.

A harmonious relationship makes for better parenting and a contented child. So don’t wait for a crisis – get support to strengthen your relationship. We can show you how to head off any teething troubles.

Penny

Penny Mansfield CBE

Director

OnePlusOne



Theme 1: Sleep

Sleep deprivation is a huge issue for new parents. Looking after a baby can be exhausting and when you're kept awake at night as well, tempers can start to fray. This can lead to couples saying hurtful things they don't mean but can't take back.

A study in 2002 found that fathers often report greater change in their levels of fatigue than mothers.¹ Tiredness and fatigue are significant problems for new parents because they can decrease their ability to engage in efficient and effective problem solving and in the learning necessary for successful adaptation to new roles.²

Mothers' and fathers' level of fatigue may affect their satisfaction in their relationship because it affects their ability to take notice and be sensitive to each other's needs.³

Advice from an experienced parent

"Realise you will have less sleep and aim to share night time feeds. In the early days though, both get up, one make a cup of tea and the other feed."

New Research

What people said...

Ahmed said: "I wish that I had been told that after the birth life becomes twice as fast. You have to react at twice the speed and your sleep divides into half and your patience must double."

David, said: "The first few months were hard and there were certainly times when the sleepless nights, financial worries and dirty nappies put a strain on our relationship, but it gets easier and we are definitely stronger for it."

Cheryl said: "The first few months of sleepless nights were testing however once we got in a routine we have continued to be a strong family unit."

Our survey said...

- More than a third of new parents (38%) said they suffered from a lack of sleep, and one in five (20%) said they argued with their partner more since having their baby.
- When asked what they longed for most immediately after their baby was born, nearly two-thirds (62%) of new parents said a good night's sleep.
- This compares to 35% longing for more money and 27% for more time with their partner.

¹ Susan M Eleck, Diane Brage Hudson and Margaret Ofé Fleck (2002) Couples' Experiences with Fatigue during the Transition to Parenthood.

² Harte L, Freele M and Milde F (1990) Fatigue. Nursing Clinics of North America, 25, 967-976

³ Eleck, Hudson and Fleck (2002)

Theme 2: Sex

Sex is an important part of any couple relationship. It brings intimacy and sets this relationship apart from any other. When a couple has a baby this can cause difficulties because men and women think differently about sex. Men generally want their sex life to resume much more quickly than women, who need emotional intimacy first.⁴

A lack of sleep might mean that some couples are simply too exhausted or it may be that new habits and routines exclude time for sex. Sadly some women find it difficult to come to terms with how their body has changed and they may feel unattractive or worried about their shape. Men can find it difficult to cope with a partner's physical and emotional changes or may be struggling with the experience of birth. The couple can fall out of sync and need to find a way to meet each other's needs for inclusion and intimacy.

Couples need to understand that women often experience a lack of sexual desire after having a baby because their hormones change rather than there being a problem with their relationship. Breastfeeding women are usually more tired, as they bear the main responsibility for waking and feeding, but also they get warmth and intimacy from breastfeeding the baby and are less likely to seek it from their partner. Loss of desire is normal at this stage and, although sometimes slow to return, will come back.⁵

Experts say couples need to make time to maintain their closeness; kisses, cuddles or just a quickie, can keep the spark in the relationship. Getting out of the habit of having sex can mean that a couple could also drift apart emotionally and could signal the first stage of a relationship breaking down.

However, in a survey in 2000, Natsal found that more than half of respondents said sex wasn't the most important thing in a marriage, so it is possible to keep a relationship on track without it.⁶

New Research

What people said...

James, said: "I think the most important things in a relationship are trust, maturity to avoid things like jealousy and to be able to understand things, and a passionate sexual attraction."

Angela, said: "The sleepless nights can take a toll on one another, men can feel pushed out once the baby arrives, your sex life can become non-existent for a while and confidence the woman feels about her body can suffer from all the changes."

Our survey said...

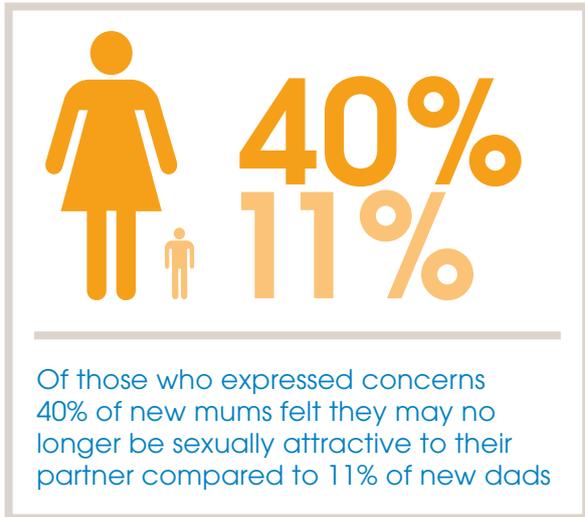
- A quarter of new parents said there was a lack of time to spend as a couple and 13% said there was a lack of sex in their relationship.
- Just over a third (36%) of new parents said having a baby brought them closer together
- 40% of new mums, who had post baby concerns about their relationship, felt they may no longer be sexually attractive to their partner, whilst a quarter (25%) of new dads worried their partner had gone off sex.
- Just over a quarter (27%) of new parents longed for some time alone as a couple.

⁴ D'Ardenne P and Morrod D (2003) The counselling of couples in healthcare settings: a handbook for clinicians London: Whurr Publishers

⁵ John M Gottman and Julie Schwartz Gottman. 'And Baby Makes Three' p160

⁶ Natsal survey, 2000

Sex



Case Studies

Rebecca Harmston, 38, who lives near Norwich with her partner James, 52, and two children, Caitlin, 7, and Callum, 3.

“Being intimate with each other is difficult as our son wakes up at the slightest sound, however, that’s not really caused any issues between us. When you have a baby you learn to show affection for your partner in different ways. I do things like cook him a meal I know he’ll really like.”

Chrissy Taylor, 29, from Liverpool, lives with her husband of 6 years Joe and their two sons, Joseph-Alex, 5½, and Mason-Riley, 2½.

“There was definitely less intimacy between us than there had been before we’d had children. I found it much harder to relax and get in the mood, but I do think intimacy is an important part of a relationship and so tried to keep it going.”

Advice from an experienced parent

“Try snuggling up on the sofa or lying closely in bed together. Hopefully the sexual side of things will resume naturally when you feel ‘ready.’”

Top tips

- Remember that the experience of having a baby is different for men and women - give yourselves time to get close again.
- Sex doesn’t always have to be about intercourse – it can be as simple as making time for a kiss and a cuddle.
- Make time for each other as romantic partners rather than just as ‘Mum and Dad’ – try to keep something of your original identities.

Theme 3: Sacrifice

Many new parents complain they lose something of their identity after their child is born. They feel they have already given up something of themselves in becoming 'a couple' but once the child arrives they find their independent working lives slipping away from them. Instead they become mum and dad, a homemaker and a breadwinner – more traditional roles.

Both parents are likely to find they have to make sacrifices for their new arrival, such as giving up hobbies, sports or time with their friends; something which seems to be more of a problem for new dads. Mums may feel their sacrifice is even greater as they step out of the workplace on maternity leave or put their career on hold to take care of their child. New mums, separated from their workmates, can feel isolated and it can be hard to make new friends and be seen as anything other than your child's mum.

Online sites such as the CoupleConnection, Netmums and Dad.info provide a lifeline for parents coming to terms with their new roles.

Advice from experienced parents

"You will most likely be at work Monday to Friday and only have the weekend to sit in front of the idiot box - WRONG!!! You have ONLY the weekend to spend with your family."

"Embrace the changes brought about by commitment and having children...Not all changes are an assault on your autonomy and sense of identity - try to enjoy your new role."

New Research

What people said...

Alison said: "I also think making sacrifices, for example something small like watching a TV show together that one person likes but the other doesn't, instead of point blank refusing to watch something together."

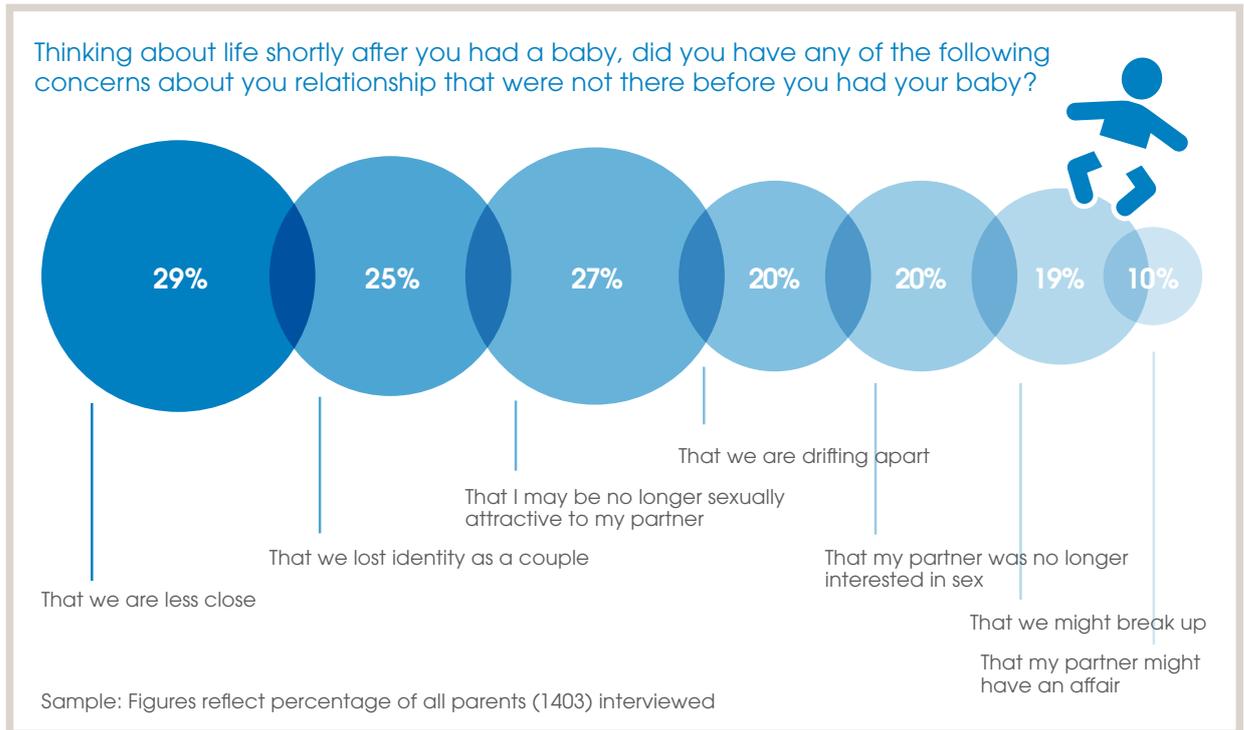
Terry said: "If you sacrifice other activities and make extra time for your partner you can show that you are committed to them and devoted to the relationship. The more you put in, the more they will put in."

George said: "If you value your relationship, sometimes you'll make sacrifices to protect it. People behind a strong relationship often are selfless and think of others."

Our survey said...

- 62% of new parents just wanted a good night's sleep, although 18% wanted someone to clean up for them
- One in 10 found that changes in their lifestyle had a negative effect on their relationship with their partner
- Almost a quarter (24%) of new parents longed for some time on their own after having their child.

Sacrifice



Case Studies

Rebecca Harmston, 38, lives with husband James and their two children – Caitlin, 7, and Callum, 3

“I did go back to my job...after having my children but about six months ago I decided to become a stay at home mum. I was finding it difficult to balance work with other priorities, particularly as I have health issues that need to be dealt with and my son has reflux, which can cause problems.”

“It was strange at first to become a stay-at-home mum, especially on the school run. The other parents knew who our children were and had used to chat to our childminder when she dropped our daughter off at school. It was quite strange to start getting into conversations the other mums but I’m getting used to it now!”

Top Tips

- Stop seeing your sacrifices as a competition – realise that you’re both giving up something and enjoy your new roles.
- Remember if your partner has given up work to take care of the baby, they may be feeling isolated from the world – make time for them to remain connected to their old identity and have a girls’ or boys’ night – or the time for an interest or hobby.
- If you find that you’re arguing a lot, check out OnePlusOne’s ‘How to argue better’ course for advice on resolving conflict (<http://thecoupleconnection.net/courses/courses/how-to-argue-better>)

Theme 4: Share

Couples who live together before becoming parents will have already gone through battles over who-does-what in terms of domestic chores, but when they become parents this changes all over again.

Fathers are now expected to be more hands-on when it comes to parenting, but the question around the equal division of labour still remains. There is, however, an incentive for men to do their bit - research has shown that division of chores can affect a couple's sex life. Couples where the man does housework were found to be happier with their love life.⁷

Women - including those who have previously been career high-fliers - can find themselves at home looking after the children while their partner is at work. This can lead to them feeling isolated and resentful towards their partner who is perceived as being out 'having fun' and enjoying post-work drinks with colleagues.

Sometimes it is expected that the person at home will do all the housework but any attempt to tally domestic chores against paid work can cause arguments.⁸

During maternity leave, couples can settle into a pattern where the woman does most of the chores because she is at home early on, but it is wise to establish a fairer routine for when she returns to work. Juggling a job, a baby and all the housework can lead to an exhausted unhappy mum. This makes it more likely couples will argue.

New Research

What people said...

Rachel said: "The less sleep you get the worse you will feel and when it comes to the housework it will be there tomorrow!!!"

Lucy said: "We are also all getting older and lives busier so by the time all the work, chores, children time, housework etc are done there is often little energy left for relationship building and this is the thing that most often suffers."

Our survey said...

- 25% of new mums would like their partner to help out more, compared to just 7% of new dads
- One in 10 new mums also said they would like someone to cook a meal for them.
- Around a quarter of mums and dads said they longed for time alone as a couple immediately after having their child.

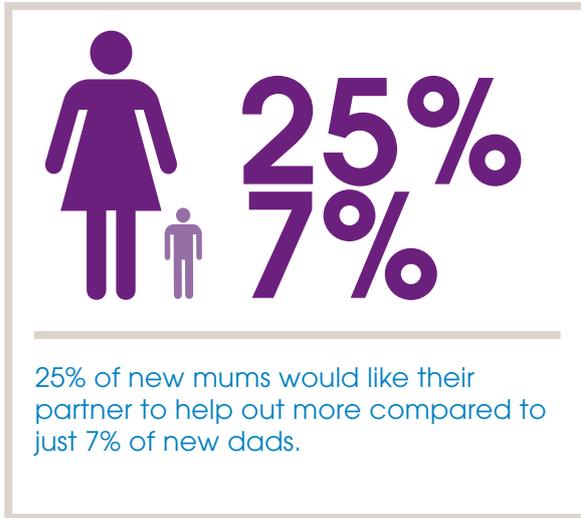
Advice from an experienced parent

"Don't wait to be asked. If you see your little bundle of joy needs changing, or your partner needs the pram set up, do it!"

⁷ Gager & Yasiku (2010) "Who has the time? The relationship between household labor time and sexual frequency", Journal of Family Issues, February

⁸ Gilad Herschberger et al (2009) 'Attachment, marital satisfaction, and divorce during the first fifteen years of parenthood', Personal Relationships, 16 pp401-420

Sharing



Case Studies

Emma, 29, lives in Banbury with her two children, who are aged 3 months and 21 months and her husband of five years.

“When a relationship isn’t going well, people shouldn’t panic as it can be strengthened. Particularly when you are new parents, the little gestures to each other will strengthen a relationship. For example, if you see your partner is looking tired, it might be as simple as offering to cook tea.”

“Before we had kids I worked full time and we shared all the household duties like making dinner, so I did have to get used to having a new role and dynamic between us. But ultimately it doesn’t really matter who’s had the hardest day or who’s most tired. Both partners need to work together to help each other out and be there to support each other.”

Lara Bincham, 27, lives in London with her partner of 5 years and their two sons

“Sharing out household chores like doing the washing up has always been a cause of arguments between us. If I ask him to do things, my partner usually will but I don’t want to nag and it annoys me when things don’t get done.”

“I feel like I have moved on and matured as I have become a mother but he still acts the way he always has done. On his days off he’ll happily stay in bed til mid-morning even though I’ve been up very early with the kids. By the time he’s up and dressed it’s too late to go anywhere and do anything as a family.”

Top Tips

- It’s not about sharing out the housework 50/50 – it’s about making it fair so that each person does what they can manage. When chores are redistributed, men tend to lose leisure time, while women gain it!
- As part of your baby preparations, hold a light-hearted ‘Domestic AGM’ where you divide up the chores and keep a record of who does what. It’s also a good idea to review this regularly to make sure it’s still fair.
- From the start of maternity leave, set a good regime of who does what – that way it won’t come as a shock to the system when the woman goes back to work.

Support – help is at hand...

You've bought the pram, decorated the nursery and stocked up with newborn nappies so you're ready for the birth, right? But what happens after the birth when real life has to go on?

If you haven't considered how you and your partner will cope with the emotional upheaval a new baby will bring, you may find yourselves struggling. It is important to remember that you're still a couple and having a strong relationship can make you a better parent.

Relationships are like rollercoasters with ups and downs along the way and, as part of your baby preparations, you need to sit down together and think about how you will cope when troubles arise.

Research has shown that new parents recognise a need for support in looking after their relationship but say they wouldn't go looking for it as 'relationship advice'. Mums, in particular, are avid consumers of online parenting advice so OnePlusOne will be working with its digital partners Dad.info and Netmums to ensure its 'strengthening relationships' message is communicated via a 'side door'. Couples in need of information about relationships will receive it through the portals they use for parenting support without having to look for it separately.

New parents need to know that it is perfectly normal to feel like you're struggling with a new baby and that it's ok to ask for help. No one will judge you for needing some support.

On websites, such as the CoupleConnection, couples can speak to other new parents and know that their situation is normal. The aim is to encourage them to take the information and apply it to their own situation, creating their own solution.

New Research

What people said...

Toni said: "When asking about relationships in general I would go to my aunty because I know she will always have my best interests at heart, this is good because she will tell me the truth no matter what."

Iain said: "I suppose I have moaned to my friends about issues that I have been having, but I have never really sought their advice. I find it difficult to discuss these things outside of the relationship, so try to resolve any problems by speaking to my wife."

Our survey said...

- 65% of new parents agree that relationship support is important even for couples getting along well.
- In terms of all parents, one-third (32%) would consult online websites for advice, with almost half 25-34-year-olds using this as a source of advice (49%).
- 63% of new parents would consult a healthcare professional such as a midwife or health visitor - with mums more likely (69%) than dads (58%)
- 63% would also ask their own parents for advice and 58% would speak to friends or other family.
- 18-24-year-olds are most receptive to advice (73%) and 25-34-year-olds (67%).

Case Studies

Suzanna Taylor, 36, lives in Sutton Coldfield with her husband Aaron and two girls, Evie, age 5 and Nadia, age 2

“Having children was definitely the changing point. I feel I poured so much into being the best mother I could to the detriment of my relationship. There’s so much information and advice about how to be a parent but nothing to tell you or help you maintain your relationship at the same time.”

Tami Anderson (30) lives with husband Ross (32) and their two children Ethan (5) and Fyfa (7 months).

“We didn’t really talk to anyone else about our changing lifestyle. We had friends in the same position but I didn’t like to bring it up too much in case they thought we weren’t coping or doing something wrong. We should have asked for help or at least talked more with other people because actually everyone is probably feeling the same and wanting the same help.”

Support



Nearly two thirds (61%) of new mums are looking online for advice

Top tips

- Don't be afraid to ask for help – there are probably a lot of other parents going through exactly the same as you who will be delighted to share experiences. Sometimes just knowing you're not alone can help and others can often see humour in a situation which will help you keep it in perspective – hard to do on your own and when you're tired!
- Don't wait until you're at a crisis point before you ask for help – work out where you and your partner are likely to have trouble and work out how to deal with it before the situation arises.
- There are lots of places online where you can find advice and forums where you can share your experiences with other people and learn from their feedback.

Sources of information and support:

OnePlusOne has an online course called 'Changes for me and us' which helps couples to prepare for the changes a baby brings to their life. You can find it here: (<http://thecoupleconnection.net/articles/online-course-changes-for-me-and-us>)

Letters to New Parents

Participants in an online community who contributed to this survey were asked to write a letter to a friend who was due to have a baby, with advice based on their experience as a new parent. Here are a few of their stories:

Dear Simon and Jude

Congratulations on the news of your baby! Becoming a parent can be very daunting so I thought I'd write this letter to offer you some advice. Now is the time to look after one another more than ever, pregnancy and the arrival of your baby can put big strains on relationships. Take time out to talk to one another, expressing any fears or worries you both may have. Talking is good, it's not just the mother who will go through all these changes, the father will too, how will you be a good parent and will we still do things like we used to when the baby is here? Communication is the key to a healthy relationship.

Once you are settled in at home with your new arrival, let the new grandparents look after the baby for a few hours and use this time to go out together as a couple, whether it's to watch a film, for a meal or even just for a drive where you can talk in privacy. If you don't feel like going out then use the time to catch up on sleep, as you'll both be feeling tired and irritable and we all know we can snap at one another when this happens.

If things are getting on top of you, then it is ok to ask for help, don't feel like you need to juggle everything on your own. Try and let your partner be involved as much as you can, he may feel pushed out if you are doing everything yourself.

Lots of love, Ali xxx

Hey buddy,

Firstly congratulations on the great news, I couldn't be happier for you and I can't wait to see the baby. I just wanted to give you a bit of advice that I wish I had been given prior to my daughter being born, as it really would have made a world of difference.

Be there for one another. Although your partner will tell you she is fine and everything is in hand, it almost certainly is not. This is difficult as you don't want to undermine her but you also want her to know you are not going anywhere and that you are here for the long haul.

Don't wait to be asked. If you see your little bundle of joy needs changing, or your partner needs the pram set up, do it! Don't expect your other half to ask you to help her as she won't. In fact she will learn to cope without your help if you do not make yourself count from the get go. Just make things a little easier for her and put your shift in.

You will most likely be at work Monday to Friday and only have the weekend to sit in front of the idiot box – WRONG!!! You have ONLY the weekend to spend with your family. Spend quality time with your child and take them out to the park, high street or wherever and let your partner have that well overdue lay in she desperately craves.

I hope some of these bits of advice will help. You're going to be a great dad!

Ade

Dear Erica and Raj

Great news about your new baby!

Try to understand that you will both be tired, excited, nervous, anxious and these emotions are all normal but can at 3am flare up to be something you don't want them to be and you may take it out on each other.

Realise you will have less sleep and aim to share night time feeds. In the early days though, both get up, one make a cup of tea and the other feed, it is important to enjoy your baby while you are both off and be happy about your new arrival. Get a black out blind for your room so you get a good snooze in between waking; make time for each other on your own, if someone offers to babysit, take them up on your offer and go see a film or have a nice meal.

Men - make sure you pay attention to your wife still, she is feeling ugly, fat and tired...it will be appreciated!

If baby is sleeping both sit down and take a nap, talk or watch TV, house work can wait!

Talk Talk Talk-----don't stop talking to each other and if something has upset you don't let things stew.

Take time to become intimate again, this is very scary after a baby.

Get out of the house, especially if you are both feeling tense and tired. Go for a walk and realise this sleepless time won't last forever and you must enjoy your new baby.

Lily x

Dear Ginny

I just want to offer you a bit of advice regarding relationship issues - I wish someone had talked to me about this;

Get plenty of rest as when little one is here you will have a lot of sleepless nights. Your partner will be at work all week and night feeds will be down to you. Organise a 'swap over' at weekends. I allowed my partner to keep getting his sleep throughout the week and I ended up feeling very tired and resentful that he was not sharing the load. He may be disgruntled at first but he will get used to it and it is special bonding time for him with the little one. You will be in better shape to communicate effectively and to give him the attention he needs when you spend time alone together (more about that in a bit ;-)

Having a baby takes a lot out of you emotionally and physically. You may feel uncomfortable for a while and unhappy with added weight. These feelings don't promote a desire to get things 'back on' in the bedroom and it's easy to withdraw from physical contact completely. This can make your partner think you may have 'gone off' him. Once contact stops for a period of time it gets harder to sort things out and feel close. Try snuggling up on the sofa or lying closely in bed together. Hopefully the sexual side of things will resume naturally when you feel 'ready.' In the meantime he feels, at least, that you like being near him.

Good luck Lovely Mummy-to-be, I will be thinking of you!

Carrie x

Dear Tony and Sharon

Congratulations on the good news that you're expecting your first child.

The time will be a joyous occasion that will most definitely change your lives forever. The time will move extremely fast towards the date when your baby is due. Please use this time to read as many baby books as possible.

Tony, you should be reading all the information you can on Fatherhood to get you ready for helping your partner. You should attend all ante natal classes you can. Try to meditate and relax as much as possible beforehand as you will need to be calm, cool and collected. Get yourself mentally prepared for constant nights of hardly any sleep.

Try not to get angry or upset with each other if one of you finds it is difficult to get up during the night without making a lot of noise by tripping on a bed slipper - you will end up doing a lot on auto pilot.

Try to listen to each others concerns. Tony, you should bite your tongue during any hot debates about what you're doing or saying. It's a very hormonal time for your partner. When your child is born you should try to join in as many children's activity classes as possible. You should try to help around the house as much as possible. Mummy will be very tired sometimes.

You should make some light snacks if the baby is active and there's a lack of cooking time. Definitely contribute and change the nappies.

Cheers mate,

Adam

Dear Jack,

Congratulations on the imminent arrival of your baby. Sorry it has taken so long for me to write to you. Make sure you make the most of your time as a couple with Sandy over the next few months, try and get away and spend some quality time together, as you will be very busy this time next year and wont have as much freedom to just escape and have some time together.

Don't let money get to you once the little one arrives, try and save a bit here and there if you can, and you will be well prepared once he arrives. Having a baby isn't nearly as expensive as you may think over the first year and don't go overboard with toys, as they are really not that interested until they are at least 1!

Also make sure you renew your membership at the tennis club, you are going to need your own time on a Thursday still, and I still want to be able to catch up with you for a beer!

I can always come over on a Monday when Sandra goes dancing and help you look after the little one as you both need to carry on with your activities and maintain a good social life, as neither of you are going to want to be stuck at home every night, you will probably go mad!

You will definitely enjoy it and I am sure you will be great parents!
See you tomorrow night at tennis.

Rob

Personas

People respond to the challenges of parenthood in different ways. Here are a few 'new parent' personality types that we spotted in the research.

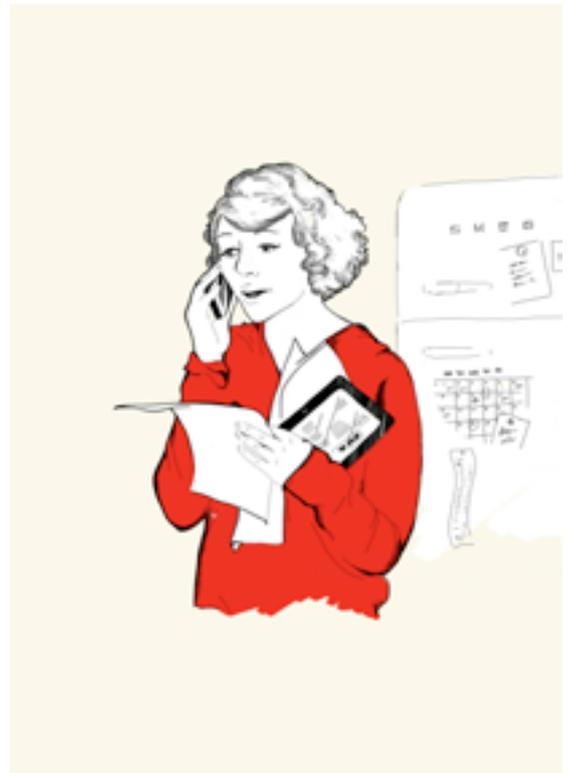
Nappy Pappies

I'm a dad! Amazing! Er, now what? Nappy Pappies struggle with their newfound identity as fathers. They know that new things are required of them, if only someone would tell them what those things are... Early onset of Nappy Pappy is easy to spot (just caught yourself rearranging nappies again?) but chronic cases are harder to identify. For these guys it's become easier to avoid the confusion and incompetence and escape, often to a semi fictional world of work. Usually found in Starbucks at 7.30am, attending semi-fictional meetings with themselves and a tall latte with an extra shot.



Info Maniacs

How many browser tabs? Info Maniacs are on a mission; finding the best potty training tips, looking for that 20% Mothercare Groupon deal, getting baby-led weaning tips for their 'DS'. It's all about the kids for these guys and it wouldn't occur to them to seek the same level of advice for themselves, their partner or their relationship. If they'd close the browser and logout of the forums for a second they might just see a disgruntled partner looking at the front door...



Warrior Mums

Next level Info Maniacs - often with more responsibilities and less resources. They juggle work, baby, finances and home with a smile through gritted teeth. They eagerly devour all information, deals, tips tricks for their children, but they would never look for relationship or individual advice. They would see that as indulgent. And there's no time for indulgence - every waking moment is dedicated to finding pragmatic advice for the battle ahead.



Worker Bees

"Fancy a cuppa?" Worker bees are constantly working on their relationships, because they know that strong relationships require work. They've usually been surrounded by strong relationships as they've grown up. They've seen others transition from independence to interdependence and are inspired by seeing other relationships survive. They develop their own 'relationship rules' as they go and typically make time for the constant exchange of small acts and tokens to express their feelings.



Recommendations

Our survey showed that nearly a quarter (23%) of parents are no longer with the parent of their first child, and of those, just over two-fifths (42%) has split up either during pregnancy or before the child reached the age of three. The Relationships Foundation reported earlier this year that the cost to the economy of family breakdown now totals £46bn⁹ and this is before you calculate the emotional cost to the families themselves, particularly children. There is a real case for doing everything we can to strengthen relationships, so we're making the following recommendations:

For Government:

Introduce a requirement for all frontline practitioners working with families to be trained to pick up the signals of relationship problems, how to respond appropriately and refer effectively.

The Coalition Government and the Prime Minister in particular have recognised the benefits of strong relationships to society. In 2010, their 'programme for government' made a commitment to put relationship support on a stable, long-term footing. This investment needs to continue beyond 2015 to ensure that couples and families can access support when it is first needed and most likely to be effective.

For practitioners:

Good-quality personal and social relationships are central to health and wellbeing so knowing how to support couples who are struggling will improve the impact of health and social care practice.

The transition to parenthood is a vulnerable time but it is an opportunity to intervene early. OnePlusOne has a flagship training programme

Brief Encounters[®] for practitioners, which enables them to support individuals or couples who 'turn to' them.

Better partners are better parents – children's lives and futures are improved if their parents are getting on, even if they have separated.

For employers:

Research has shown that when employees are happy at home, they are more likely to be engaged at work so employers have an interest in helping employees maintain a happy home life.

Relationship quality typically declines around transitions such as the birth of a child. Employers could include relationship skills as part a new parents' package for mothers and fathers returning from parental leave.

Employers need to make sure that 'flexible working' practices are in fact flexible, and do not mean employees have to be permanently available.

For more information, OnePlusOne's Happy Homes, Productive Workplaces report is available here http://www.onepluse.org.uk/content_item/happy-homes-productive-workplaces/

⁹ The Relationships Foundation calculated the cost of family breakdown as £46bn in March 2013. <http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org/Web/News/News.aspx?news=150&RedirectUrl=%2fWeb%2fContent%2fDefault.aspx%3fContent%3d6>

Still together



For those no longer with the other parent of their first child, just over two fifths (42%) had split up either during pregnancy or before the child reached the age of three.

For families and friends:

If they ask for your advice, listen. Don't immediately jump in with an opinion. Encourage them to work together to find to their own solution.

Help new parents by offering to babysit so they can spend some time alone together – this can be as simple as watching the baby for an hour while the couple have some time to themselves.

Don't take sides if they are not getting on – encourage them to tell each other what they are unhappy about.

For couples:

Communication is the vital element in all relationships – no matter how difficult things are make sure you keep talking and listening to each other. When you are tense and stressed, it's easy to turn against your partner or simply

to turn away. Instead turn to your partner, share the issue and work through it together.

Ensure that both of you get time on your own as well as time as a couple.

If you are struggling in your relationship, don't be afraid to ask for help. If you don't want to talk to someone face-to-face, log on to the CoupleConnection where there are people to help you.

You might find it reassuring and fun to talk to other mums and dads online. Visit Netmums or Dad.info. Other parents are happy to share their experiences, offer suggestions or just have a chat. You will find company when you are feeling low, at all hours of the day and night even during the 3am feed!

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Claremont

Contact a Family

Dad.info

ICM research

Netmums

The CoupleConnection

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Department
for Education

OnePlusOne

Strengthening relationships

1 Benjamin Street, London EC1M 5QG
OnePlusOne.org.uk
T: +44(0)207 553 9530
F: +44(0)207 553 9550

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And the ParentConnection.org.uk

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