Rekindling the couple relationship after having a baby

The arrival of a baby, especially a first child, is perhaps the most significant event in a couple's life. The transition from couple to family is much anticipated, and yet one for which most couples are not truly prepared. With the arrival of a new family member comes a host of responsibilities and challenges for new parents.



How and to what degree a couple's relationship is affected by the birth of their first child depends on a number of complex factors. One common ingredient, however, is how knowledgeable the couple is about what may happen in their relationship after the first child comes into their lives. Perhaps the best method of preventing any negative impact to the relationship, is to be well-informed about what to expect as you make the transition from couple to family.

Division of household tasks

During and immediately following the transition into parenthood, there seems to be a more traditional division of household tasks, with males focused on paid work outside the home and females focused on child care and other household responsibilities. Fathers tend to feel a greater responsibility based on having to provide for their family. Women generally leave their employment at this stage to take care of the baby and, at the same time, they increase the number of household tasks they perform.

Many women report disappointment and dissatisfaction because of this change in household responsibilities. How household tasks and child care responsibilities get carried out actually varies greatly from couple to couple. Couples who are sensitive to the issue can often discuss and problem-solve the issue well in advance, before it leads to negative feelings on either side.

Leisure, companionship and intimacy

After the birth of a child, the time that couples spend together changes not in terms of amount, but in terms of content. That is, couples spend just as much time together as prior to the baby's arrival, but they do very different things during this time. Couples have less leisure time and the time that they do have tends to include watching over the new baby.

A general lack of intimacy is a chief complaint of new parents. Changes in the sexual relationship are reported by many couples. Lack of sleep and fatigue often affect sexual desire. New parents also find it difficult to be as spontaneous as they were before the baby. For all of these reasons, couples may encounter problems in rekindling their sexual relationship after the baby is born on both a physical and emotional level. Again, couples vary and these types of changes may be short-lived or more long-term.

Emotions in the couple relationship

Couples generally report less expression of affection, an increase in arguments and conflict, and general tension in the marital relationship after a new child is born.

Females tend to be more unsatisfied than males with the couple relationship following the arrival of a first child. Increased preparation for parenthood will help couples maintain a positive level of relationship satisfaction after the new baby arrives. Again, these findings vary widely across couples and being sensitive to the issue can head off troubles later on.

How to maintain your relationship

What can couples do to maintain the quality of relationship that they desire? The following tips will help you focus on your relationship when your life becomes centered on the new baby:

Find time to connect. This may seem very difficult when couples have less time and are more tired. You don't have to spend long periods of time together, and you don't even have to leave the home to do this. During the course of the days and evenings, there are pockets of time that are opportunities for couple connecting. For example, when baby is sleeping, instead of focusing on doing one more load of laundry or another household task, spend some quiet time with your partner to catch up on each other's lives.

Connections can also be made by telephone during the day or by leaving notes. Find ways to let your partner know that they make a positive difference in your life. By reconnecting as soon as possible after baby is born, couples can establish a pattern of intimacy early on that will help keep them stay connected and get them through the rough.

Communicate with your partner. Communication is key, especially since both of you are experiencing this time very differently. In expressing your feelings and listening to what your partner is going through, you will have a better picture of what is really happening in your situation. You may also find that some of your feelings are similar, for example, the feeling of abandonment, but for different reasons. In understanding what is happening in the relationship and why each individual is behaving as they are, you have an excellent place to start rekindling and reconnecting.

Delegate the workload. With a baby comes an incredible increase in the workload at home. There are not only household chores, but also baby care responsibilities. It’s important to share tasks fairly. How these are divided will be different for each couple. Dividing tasks will have a two-fold impact on the relationship. First, a more equal division of labour will free up time for both partners. Secondly, each partner will feel less fatigued, and have more energy to commit to the couple relationship.

Conduct a regular relationship check. Life with a baby is so all-consuming that time flies by very quickly. The couple can find themselves in a situation where they feel like “ships passing in the night.” It’s important to evaluate your couple relationship on a regular basis. Take the time, and commit to open and honest communication. One suggestion is to set aside some time on a regular basis—how often and how much will depend on the couple—to review how the couple relationship is faring. Consider allocating a half-hour in the evening to check in, decide what's working, what isn't and what can be changed, added or taken away to increase the affection, intimacy and connection between you.

Develop a plan that works for you. There is no one way of rekindling the spark after your first child. Each couple needs to find a way that works for them. For some couples, the help of a professional to guide them and to provide suggestions for maintaining a high-quality relationship might be in order—don't hesitate to reach out for help.

Putting effort into the couple relationship is definitely worth it, as the love, intimacy, affection, appreciation and connectedness that we feel will provide us with the fuel we require to make it through life as a family. The early years are particularly time- and labour-intensive, as well as being physically and psychologically demanding. The couple time that you do carve out will provide a great escape from the chaos of day-to-day living with a young and growing family.