



After the Baby – How Married Couples Find Intimacy

by Pat LaDouceur, Ph.D.

A new baby is "one of the most profound challenges a couple will ever face," according to Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity*. Having a baby affects your health, work, finances, leisure time, relationships with friends and extended family, and your own body. And you have to manage these changes while doing more work than ever, dealing with hormonal swings, and on very little sleep.

Sleep deprivation alone is enough to explain why 67% of couples find themselves "very unhappy" in just three years after a baby is born, according to Dr. John Gottman. Sleep deprivation can cause depression, irritability, and fuzzy thinking. It's no wonder, Gottman's research shows, that only 33% of couples with a toddler describe themselves as "content."

Even while enjoying a new baby, couples struggle to find time for sleep, for communication, for each other. But many couples do maintain a loving, intimate relationship despite these problems. Here are some of the things they do.

Build Warmth and Closeness

- **Find time for each other.** This is one of the most difficult things for new parents to do, and also the most essential. Even airlines advise passengers who are parents to "put on their own oxygen mask first." Give your relationship some "oxygen" by enlisting relatives or baby sitters to spend a few minutes (or hours) with your baby while you spend some time with your partner.
- **Appreciate your partner.** You might be thinking about what a great mother, father, or provider your partner is, but make sure you also share your feelings. One way to do this is to leave a small notepad on a counter where both of you will see it every day. Once a day, write a brief note about something you appreciate about your partner. Make sure your appreciation is specific – not just "You're a great mom," but "The way you were singing to our daughter last night made me smile. You have a lovely voice."
- **Find time for romance and passion.** Couples seem to disagree frequently about how often they make love. But Gottman found that for both men and women it's not the quantity of sex that matters. It's that both men and women want to feel desired and desirable.

Reduce Conflict

- **Slow down.** Even when you're feeling irritable and sleep-deprived, it's important to handle conflict well. A cranky comment can make the difference between getting what you want and feeling bad about your relationship. When your partner says something that pushes your button, take a few deep breaths and think about how you want to respond.
- **Avoid criticism,** blaming, and contempt. Instead, ask for what you want clearly and directly. Focus on your own feelings and what you want to happen.
- **Take a break** when you feel the conversation escalate. When you start to feel tense, your heart rate



goes up, you breathe faster, your body is going into fight-or-flight mode. You can't have a thoughtful conversation. Talk about the issue later, when you're both feeling calm.

- **Recognize that your partner is under stress too**, and can't always respond in a way that feels supportive.

Make Time for Your Marriage

- **Schedule a weekly date.** Take the time you schedule with each other seriously, the same way you would a business meeting or a teacher conference. Couples that wait until they "find" some extra time for each other often find that it never appears. There are always more play dates, more chores, and more errands than there is time. Make your relationship a priority.
- **Take a vacation with your partner.** A few times a year, schedule time for just the two of you to reconnect and rediscover what attracted you to each other in the first place. It can be difficult to leave young children behind for a day, or a week, even with a trusted relative or friend. Yet if you don't take this precious time, you might find yourself so caught up in the daily needs of your family that you start to drift apart.

Having a new baby is definitely a challenge. How well your marriage survives this challenge depends on the little things you do each day, each week, to build warmth and reduce conflict. Every time you take a few moments to show appreciation, think before you respond, or find an evening to talk and have fun, you build warmth and intimacy in your relationship.

References

Gottman, John, "The Early Show," CBS, March 29 2007
Perel, Esther, *Mating in Captivity*.

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