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5 Love Savers

Written by Rachel Sarah
Wednesday, 10 January 2007



Pre-baby steps to take to protect your relationship.

When Gretchen and Dowlan Smith of Round Rock, TX, conceived their daughter five weeks after getting married, they quickly realized the honeymoon was over. Gretchen's "never-ending nausea" sent her straight to the sofa where she slumbered sitting up halfway to quell the queasiness. But even after the morning sickness passed, Gretchen recalls "the couch was the only place I could get some sleep."

The Smiths aren't the only couple whose relationship has been blindsided by the baby. "Until you live through it, you don't know how much it's going to challenge you," says Jeff Herring, a relationship coach in Atlanta who started counseling new parents after being caught off guard by the arrival of his first son.

Expectant couples typically take several steps to prepare for a baby—selecting a name, decorating a nursery, packing that hospital bag. But they seldom plan for the impact that a new baby will have on their relationship. Smith says that she and her husband never had a chance to bond as a newly wedded couple "before the hormonal changes wreaked havoc on our

marriage."

To complicate their relationship further, the Smiths have since welcomed a second child. "We have been married 43 months. I have been pregnant 18 of those months and breastfeeding for nine," Smith adds. "We see each other more as Mommy and Daddy than as husband and wife. We are trying desperately to figure out how to be lovers again."

Before you find yourself in this bind, heed these expert-recommended, couple-tested love savers to safeguard your relationship now.

#1 : Accept that things will change

To keep your love strong, relationship experts say that you must first understand that everything will not stay the same postbaby. They pinpoint a number of issues that first-time parents are often surprised by, such as exhaustion, financial stress, and clashes over household chores.

Becoming a new parent is like going over "a speed bump of some size," says Barb Elgin, a relationship coach in central Florida. "Realize that you're going to be under stress."

One source of stress might be unanticipated shifts in your roles and responsibilities. "I've talked to a lot of women who think they're going back to work, and they don't," says Elgin. "The husband is expecting the wife to go back to work, and then if she changes her mind—oops! What if the woman was the main breadwinner? It's an adjustment for the guy, too."

Elgin encourages couples to get in the habit of talking openly about work and money matters before the baby arrives. As you discuss these thorny topics, "be loving and understanding," she advises.

Not all of the change you experience during pregnancy and postpartum is negative, of course. One gratifying change is that you will come to appreciate your partner in a whole new way—as a parent. Seeing how your mate settles a crying baby may just make you fall in love all over again.

#2 : Talk about sex

Remember how your twice-a-day romps downshifted to twice a week when you were first dating? Well, expect even less lovin' post-baby—at least in the beginning.

Herring says that a temporary loss of intimacy and private time is normal. Fathers can help by understanding what their partners are going through physically as they recover from birth as well as hormonal changes. "I usually ask fathers, 'How anxious would you be to go horseback riding if you just passed a bowling ball?'"

Then there are the issues of sleeplessness and fatigue. "We are definitely functioning fine as a couple on a day-to-day basis," says Sandy Shih, a California mom of a two-year-old son and newborn daughter. But she blames exhaustion for putting a damper on their sex life. "Once night falls, there is no intimacy. I have never had such a hard time being intimate with my husband before. But I'd rather sleep than find a solution at this point."

Until you adjust to parenthood, you'll both need to have patience. Herring encourages dads to lend a hand with their newborns, rather than sulking with feeling like "you're being rejected."

Even if lovemaking simmers down for a while, rest assured it will make a comeback. Smith says date nights rekindled passion with her husband. "We try to go out for dinner twice a month," she says. "We also try to go to the gym at the same time and work out next to each other. We don't talk too much, but at the end, we usually end up staring at each other in the hot tub."

#3 : Prepare for differences

You agree on most things but a baby may bring out some unforeseen distinctions. For instance, you may be surprised to learn that your seemingly modern husband is more traditional than you thought and you wind up changing all the diapers or being expected to get up at night.

To avoid Venus-Mars clashes, talk about how you will share childrearing responsibilities now. It might help to discuss how your parents did it and how you'd like things to be the same or different. "After the baby is born, we find that there tends to be division of labor along traditional lines—even with couples who would consider themselves non-traditional," says Sheila Longerbeam, a marriage and family therapist based in Oakland, CA.

"We encourage the birth mother to be willing to give up some control of the household and baby care and for the other parent—often the dad—to jump in and participate and not wait to be asked," she adds. "We want to discourage the cementing of traditional roles, because it can lead to resentment on the part of the mother and withdrawal on the part of the father." In her workshops, "we do an exercise in which the father focuses on how he especially wants to be involved in terms of parenting and make a plan for that to happen."

Herring also strongly encourages dads to jump in head first. "There are two things we can't do for kids: birth them and nurse them," he says. "But everything else we can do, and I encourage the guys to get in there." To establish a pattern before you become parents, go to prenatal visits together and make key decisions, like finding a nanny, as a team. Once you have your baby, new fathers might also "get in there" by making dinner plans and reservations, for instance, or hiring a babysitter.

Recognize, too, that your different backgrounds and perspectives benefit your baby. "I used to think that everything we did had to be the same—from diapering to feeding to bedtime routines," says mom-of-two Bree Taylor of Hilliard, OH. "Now I realize that it is good for our daughters to see us doing different things and learning different things from both of us. Once I had this realization, we connected more strongly because we realized that our daughters could gain a richer experience from having both of us and not just carbon copies of each other."

#4 : Get expert advice

Just as more couples these days are getting premarital counseling, some are seeking pre-baby advice, too. Because parenting can take a toll on couples, relationship experts encourage them to get advance help by either visiting a marriage therapist or taking one of the new parents-to-be classes that are popping up.

"With most couples, there's a real sharp drop in satisfaction after the baby arrives," says Sam Jinich, Ph.D., a San Francisco-based clinical psychologist who also leads Bringing Baby Home (BBH) workshops, a rapidly spreading national workshop created by relationship experts John and Julie Gottman. "If the quality of the relationship drops in the first year in life, there will be an increase in conflict."

Longerbeam, who also teaches for BBH, notes that conflict is not the problem but how you cope with it. In fact, one full day of her workshop "is focused on handling conflict," she says. "We talk about how to bring up discussions about a conflict in a productive way, how to avoid language and facial expressions that express contempt, and how to take time-outs when things escalate. Conflict is best handled in a context of appreciation and positive regard."

Parents-to-be can learn how to boost their bond, for example, by creating a culture of appreciation. "After the baby arrives there is less time for communication," Longerbeam says. But if you adopt the BBH motto—"small things often"—you can demonstrate your appreciation of your partner and bolster the relationship.

What are examples of small things? Give your partner a hug. Stroke his hair. Suggest that you two take an after-dinner walk with the baby in the stroller. Save an article or cartoon you think he'll find entertaining. Couples also set up rituals of connection—such as date nights or romantic rendezvous—pre-baby. Having established the ritual, it will be much easier to reestablish it after the first crazy weeks of parenting.

#5 : Create a vision

Dr. Jackie Black, who counsels couples in Los Angeles, says expectant parents should start with a vision or a mission statement for their lives together. "The first thing I do is ask each parent-to-be to write down their vision," says Black. "What do you want your life to look like?"

Black explains further, "creating your vision means designing and clarifying where you are going in your life." For many, that will take some soul searching. "At first, many couples are focused on the color of the room and the bumpers

on the crib,” says Black. “It’s often the very first time that people think about this. Then they read their visions for the first time to me.”

Still stumped? Black encourages couples to “think about everything in the world that touches you in some way and how you want that to be.” This means imagining your ideal life with your partner and child, your personal world of family and friends, and your home and community.

If an Ozzie-and-Harriet image doesn’t suit you, consider role models in your life, like family, neighbors, co-workers. Or clip out magazine images that speak to you. Then compare notes and talk about how you might make your vision a reality.

San Francisco mom Karen Solomon, who gave birth to her first child last Halloween, says that part of her vision with her husband, Matthew, is to find at least 15 minutes a day to connect in front of their child. “You’re parents now, but you’re still in a relationship with each other.”

Rachel Sarah is the mother of a 6-year-old and author of Single Mom Seeking: Play Dates, Blind Dates, and Other Dispatches from the Dating World (Avalon/Seal Press).

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