

## **Revitalizing intimacy after baby makes three**

Taking on the roles of “Mommy” and “Daddy” means an immense amount of love and daily rewards are coming your way, but this new family dynamic also challenges your relationship with your partner. Your ever-expanding “to do” list leaves little time for romance, communication, and (gasp) sex. I sat down with relationship expert Adele Fox to get some tips on regaining intimacy after “baby makes three.”

### **How does parenthood affect couples psychologically?**

Parenthood – particular first time parenthood - has huge psychological impacts. One study reported that an astonishing 92% of couples reported more conflict after their first child was born. If conflict is not approached in a healthy, productive way, then it leads to a breakdown of the partnership. This happens whether or not you have children, but children amplify the problem in that the parental responsibilities are added on top of issues that were already there. This unfortunately means that children are unfairly blamed for the struggles parents face, when studies suggest that those struggles were already there. The presence of the child just brings the issues to the surface. These challenges couples face are normal and should not be seen as the beginning of the end.

### **Is there a difference between how men and women respond psychologically when they become parents?**

Having a baby can initiate feelings of confusion and inadequacy among fathers and anger and exhaustion in mothers. To understand this emotional turmoil, we need to look at the role transition that occurs with first time parenthood. Mothers report that their role of ‘mother’ increases substantially and the role that suffers as a result is the ‘lover/partner.’ This role shift occurs from pregnancy to six months postpartum. For fathers, the identity of ‘father’ is evident later - when their child is 18 months old - and even then the identity of ‘parent’ is only one third as significant as the mother’s. The greater the discrepancy between the mother’s and father’s identities as parent, the less satisfied they will be in the relationship. During the early months of the baby’s life, the father is usually more psychologically invested in the relationship with their partner, and the mother is more

psychologically invested in the relationship with the child. This starts to balance out later, but at the

beginning it is hard for mothers to understand why the father wants to be romantic when her priority is tending to the baby. And the father can't understand why the mother doesn't want to rekindle their previous level of intimacy. To add to this, many parents are afraid to admit that they are struggling with the birth of a child when it's supposed to be the happiest time of their lives.

**What is the goal for parents who are struggling in this way?** The goal is to regain a feeling of intimacy. So let's define what we mean by "intimacy." It is more than just sex - it's the space between two people that creates safety and passion in the relationship. When you feel safe to be vulnerable in the relationship and can be "fully alive," that's when you have intimacy and passion. Intimacy is created by making sense of the other person's perspective and learning how to share in each other's growth. I like to break down the word "intimacy" like this - "in" "to" "me" "see"!

### **What is the key to regaining intimacy?**

Partners who have sustained the lover/partner identities report a higher level of satisfaction with the relationship and less parental stress. The good news is that couples can revitalize their life after children and infuse it with the passion they used to feel - with a little work! What we know is that *how intimacy is demonstrated and maintained* is key to both parental satisfaction and satisfaction within the partner relationship. Lovemaking typically declines after childbirth, but when couples don't make the effort to rekindle things in the bedroom, the 'use it or lose it' drive kicks in and it's difficult to initiate sex and romance.

We know that what happens outside the bedroom impacts what happens inside, and that the brain is the most sexual organ in the body. So there are physical and psychological resistances to enjoying sex. When couples don't establish intimacy and communication outside the bedroom, it's very difficult, if not impossible, for most couples to 'turn it on' behind closed doors.

First and foremost is to learn how to communicate and establish greater intimacy

outside the bedroom. This can be difficult to learn when we don't know how to do things differently. The best ways to make your partner feel heard is to mirror what they are saying, and to try to see things from their perspective and not your own. Often we speak in a manner that doesn't facilitate our partners really 'hearing' us -we may nag, yell, or avoid issues. Before speaking, ask yourself "what is my intention?" If your intentions are not good you will not get you what you want. You have to find a new way to communicate so that your partner will want to deliver what you really want or need.

One of the best ways to reconnect with your spouse is to engage in caring behaviors. Often we tend to do for our partner what WE want or think would be nice for us. We need to remember that this usually isn't what our partner wants. One caring behavior begets another, and you'll be surprised how showing your partner that you care in small ways will equate to big payoffs in your relationship.

### **After a long communication breakdown, how can couples figure what their partner wants?**

I tell my couples to each make a list detailing the things that would make them feel loved – this list should include *easy and repeatable* acts of kindness. They then switch lists so they will have lots of choices to hit their partner's 'care button.' Let go of the notion that your partner should know what you want and need. You have to ask for it, and always in a way that makes your partner want to do it for you!

It's also important to tell them *what you appreciate about them*. Tell them what matters to you, like the things they say and do, or just the way they are. Our voice is a powerful tool when used effectively.

When you start to do these things for your partner, they will want to reciprocate. This is how you rekindle the intimacy you may have lost, and it will translate to more romance in the bedroom!

### **If couples try these tips and still struggle with intimacy, what can they do?**

In addition to teaching couples these tools, I work in depth with couples to reestablish intimacy and safety in the relationship, which in turn creates a

nurturing environment for children. For parents, I would recommend the book "Giving the Love That Heals: a Guide for Parents" by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen Hunt, Ph.D. Their other book "Getting the Love You Want" is a similar guide to address relationship issues.

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