



Looking after your relationship as new parents

Having a baby can be a wonderfully exciting time but may also present some challenges to your relationship with your partner as two become three.

- You may both be coping with sleep deprivation, feeling a little stressed and overwhelmed as you make the necessary adjustments to your role as new parents with the responsibilities and lifestyle changes this brings.
- It can feel like a huge upheaval and massive change in your life, and it is not uncommon for new parents to experience a drop in their relationship quality and satisfaction. No relationship is perfect, and the evidence shows that having a baby can put additional strain on a couple's relationship. It is normal for there to be an increase in conflict over the first year - this is a huge change for both of you and it takes time to adjust. Understanding that this is quite normal, and you are not alone, may help you to cope with these changes.
- Couples often wonder about how a baby may affect their relationship, what they pay less attention to is how their relationship affects their baby. How you behave and speak with each other has a big impact on your baby. Babies are very sensitive to what goes on around them, they are like little sponges absorbing what is happening around them. If you have a mainly happy, relaxed relationship, your baby will pick up on this. If your relationship is tense, stressed, or unhappy, your baby will also pick up on this. Raised voices and shouting is distressing for babies.
- Couples come in all sorts of forms and, whatever type of relationship you are in, it still needs to be worked on now and in the future. It may help to think about this with an example of something like a car or your house boiler, we need to look after them and have them serviced to make sure they are working, so it is with relationships.

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For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was updated on 16/03/2022.

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Top tips for looking after your relationship as new parents

- **Finding time for each other is important and investing in your relationship is time well spent.** The demands of a new baby can easily affect the quality and quantity of time you spend with each other. Try and set aside some “us” time, ideally daily if you can or at least a few times a week when you can really pay attention and listen to each other. Simple activities like going for a walk or sitting down together over a cuppa, a drink, or a meal. If you are lucky enough to have someone who can babysit, you may even be able to have a few hours of adult-only time.

- **Good communication is vital** - evidence shows that spending some time each day listening to each other with your full attention is the best way to improve your relationship.

- **Active listening** means really trying to focus on what the other person is saying and noticing the feelings behind the words and their body language. Try to put yourself in the other person’s shoes and see the world from their point of view without interrupting them. Summarise the gist of what you heard to check you have understood correctly and tentatively suggest any feelings you may have picked up.

This active listening takes practice and is one of the most powerful things you can do to strengthen your relationship. Most people do not feel listened to or heard and are crying out for a good listening to. We have two ears and one mouth, so it is suggested we spend twice as long listening as talking.

Honesty can be difficult but it is always best to talk about small irritations or issues before they develop into something bigger. Try to speak personally and respectfully about how you feel and avoid blaming “you” language.

- **The magic ratio of “five to one”.** Humour is a great diffuser of tension. John Gottman, a world-renowned relationship researcher, found that couples have better relationships when their positive feelings and actions outweigh the negative. He came up with the magic 5 to 1 ratio. Simply put, for every negative interaction, you should create five positive ones to balance it out.

- **Couples with a new baby tend to argue more.** The top 5 things that couples argue about most are housework, money, sex, extended family or in-laws, parenting and bringing up their baby. You may be able to prevent disagreements turning into arguments by listening to each other and talking things through when you both feel calm.

- **Recognising your style of communication and how you behave when you are stressed or upset is helpful.** We all respond differently - do you walk away, sulk, shout and get angry or do you withdraw or do something else? What does your partner do? By recognising you and your partner’s style of conflict, you can learn how to defuse tense situations by understanding what helps to calm things down. Talk to each other and find out what are the most helpful things you can do for each other when either of you feel stressed, upset, or angry. Make a note of it and then remember to do it!

- **Remember the things about each other that attracted you in the first place.** What did you used to enjoy doing together? Do you still do these things now? What could you do more of together to make you both happy? Share ideas about what you could do.

- **Find the good in each other and comment on it.** Spend time finding things you can praise or comment positively on to each other. Saying thank you, a hug or gentle touch count as positive interactions. Look for the good in the other person and comment on that. We tend to be a ‘critical society’ and are often quick to complain or find fault. Learn to appreciate each other and focus on what is going well, and commenting on that is also good for our mental health.

- **Romance and reality.** Try to keep romance alive and work on the little things that can make a big difference. Make time for each other as romantic partners rather than “mum, dad or partner” - focus on your identity outside of the parent role. Small, kind, thoughtful or romantic gestures can mean a lot. How do you like to receive love and affection and how does your partner? We all have different ways of feeling loved and appreciated, often referred to as your ‘love language’. The most common ones are **acts of service** – doing things to help each other. Or by **words of praise**, encouragement, support, and love. **Physical touch** may be what is most important to some, or **spending quality time** together may be what they really value. For others, **receiving gifts** is important. Many of us may be a mix of several different ones. It can be useful to have that conversation and find out what each other likes.

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- **Let's talk about sex.** Sex can often become low down on the list of priorities for many women after giving birth. It is common to lose interest in sex after childbirth. Fear of pain, future pregnancies, tiredness, postnatal depression and anxiety, plus other factors, can all affect your sex life and libido. It is important to talk about it early on to prevent misunderstandings and avoid feelings of hurt and rejection. There are other ways of enjoying physical touch and being intimate without having intercourse. There are lots of ways to experience pleasure together, it can be as simple as holding hands or making time for a kiss and a cuddle. For more information, see **iHV Parent Tips: Sex and intimacy: understanding changes to your sexual wellbeing following the birth of your baby** - available: <https://bit.ly/3MWuC2g>
- **Ask for help early before you hit a crisis point.** After childbirth, intercourse may be painful or difficult for a number of reasons. Do talk to your midwife, health visitor, NHS sexual health service (sometimes called a family planning clinic) or GP if you are having difficulty. Healthcare professionals are used to dealing with sensitive topics like this and can provide help and support. Please see the list to the right of organisations and resources who can support you.

Further help and resources:

There is lots of information online for mums, dads, and partners about relationships. Below are a few useful websites.

- **Relationships Matter** offers an online community to share questions and stories with, try fun and helpful activities, or get private support from a Click listener. You can register online for a free account. <https://bit.ly/3oyBQiq>
- **The Couple Connection:** <https://bit.ly/3sd4TJ4>
- **Dad.info Because Dads Matter:** <https://bit.ly/3GAKbs2>
- **OnePlusOne** has resources to help with couple relationship skills, particularly when you have had a baby. <https://bit.ly/3LfJw2N>
- **Channel Mum:** This website has information on how you can baby-proof your relationship. <https://bit.ly/3Jam8BK>
- **Netmums** has information on sex and relationships <https://bit.ly/3HDzhmA>
- **Relate** offers help and relationships support for everyone. <https://bit.ly/34JQGex>
- **Institute of Health Visiting:** You can take a look at our other resources for parents. <https://bit.ly/3B7pse8>

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