

You're In Love With Someone New

Keeping your marriage strong after baby makes three. (Or more!)

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse



I'm usually opposed to the use of war metaphors to describe anything that happens on the home front, because I don't want to diminish what happens on the battlefield.

But when I read these lines in the book "Babyproofing your Marriage," I didn't object at all: "It's been said that having a baby is like throwing a hand grenade into a marriage... Like a drill sergeant who tears down his weak recruits so he can rebuild them into soldiers, babies break us down and rebuild us into parents. They flatten everything in sight, and then make us better, stronger, and hopefully, wiser." Violence aside, in my experience these metaphors make sense.

Studies show 67 percent of couples experience a marked decline in their marriage satisfaction in the first year after having a baby.

"There's nothing more stressful

for families than the addition or subtraction of a family member," says clinical psychologist Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., author of "Marriage Rules: Advice for the Married and Coupled Up." It may be hard to understand how difficult the transition can be when you're eager to embrace your new baby.

No Marriage Left Behind

Even couples with strong relationship skills may experience periods of fighting and distance after baby arrives, says Lerner. "Kids stir up enormous feelings from our own past, so it is hard to be easygoing and calm."

Air Force spouse and mom of 3-year-old twins, Leanne Anthony, says, "I thought, after being with my husband for 10 years, that when kids came along it would be smooth sailing for us. Boy, was I wrong!"

Anthony went back to work

immediately and was up all hours of the night with the babies. "My mood changed due to stress," Anthony acknowledges, "and my husband wanted attention I couldn't give him, because there was just no time."

We stopped going out and doing anything together as husband and wife. We literally had no intimate life. The bond was gone. By the time he deployed two years later, I was ready to pull the plug on my marriage."

All new parents grapple with an expanded workload and a sharp decrease in couple time. Experts and other parents will tell you: Date night is important.

But don't be surprised when a so-called date devolves into conversations about the baby or a nasty game of "who did most of the work this week?" It's hard to shift out of mommy mode when you're sleep-deprived and emotionally exhausted.

Finding a New Normal

"Once the baby comes, you will have a different marriage," says Lerner, "and you probably won't be able to remember what your marriage was like before." Don't despair. You can renew and even enhance your relationship as your family grows.

Here's how:

Expect the Unexpected.

It helps if you realize no one is to blame for the changes in your relationship.

Accept Disagreement.

Partners may have different opinions on childrearing issues. You may be excited about breastfeeding, while your spouse may think formula is more convenient. He may want to put baby's crib in your bedroom, while you want to declare it a baby-free zone.

"Having two different opinions isn't necessarily the problem," says Lerner. "The problem happens when spouses dig in their heels and fight for their positions instead of finding a way

and self-loathing," says Lerner. And while some people expect dads to put baby's diaper on backward, men also face pressures. Many dads feel a huge sense of financial responsibility for their growing families.

When you need his help most, your baby daddy may be intensely focused on making sergeant. Even if you don't get it emotionally, acknowledge your spouse's unique perspective. You're in this together.

During his deployment, Anthony's

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It's not always reasonable to keep our lives the same when kids come along, trying to fit them in without adaptation. Anthony had to face hard facts: Being a full-time working mom to twins, one of whom has autism, wasn't feasible. So she left her job and became a stay-at-home mom.

"If you get to a point where you are depressed, stressed out, and too tired to take care of yourself, it is time to reevaluate and make a change," she says. Be flexible and revise your roles in ways that work for everyone.

to compromise." Break away from a heated argument and hold peace talks when you both feel more relaxed. Few issues require immediate resolution.

Take Your Partner's Perspective.

Having a baby stirs up intense emotions for men and women. Social pressures make a mom feel like she's failed if the baby doesn't eat homemade baby food, sleep soundly through the night, and meet (or beat) every milestone on the developmental chart. "It's normal to feel guilty, inadequate

husband opened up and told her how much he loves her and appreciates all that she does. "We started Skyping every day and e-mailing sweet things," she recalls. "When he came home 10 months later, we felt more in love than ever."

Lesson learned? Small, frequent, loving interactions with your spouse can protect your partnership from any kind of assault. Even the baby bomb. ★

[photo above courtesy of Nicole Suddeth, www.nikkinakphotography.com]

RULES FOR NEW MOMS FROM HARRIET LERNER'S BOOK, "MARRIAGE RULES"

1. Don't trade your partner in for the baby: Let your spouse know he's important and valued. Spend time just the two of you. Don't wait until your baby is filling out college applications before you hire a sitter and go on a date.
2. Restore intimacy even when you don't feel like it. ("Sex? What's that?") Your libido may or may not go into deep freeze after the baby arrives. Push yourself to have sex with your partner even if you don't feel like it.
3. Forget about self-sufficiency. With a new baby in the house, you need all the help you can get. Connect with friends and family who can provide emotional and practical support. Our community is filled with caring people who've been there!
4. Remember: You're the best expert on your own self, your baby and your marriage. Seek professional help when you need it, but avoid any expert who leaves you feeling worse than before you spoke to them.
5. Take a long-range view. Remember that marriages with babies and young kids often look entirely different down the road. Don't idealize other couples' relationships or make catastrophic statements about your own. Be kind and patient with yourselves.