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New Baby, New Sex Life

Straight Talk from Behind the Bedroom Door

BY RONA GINDIN

The big joke among new parents is often "Sex? What's that?" After childbirth, it's usually the last thing on a woman's mind and close to the first on a man's.

After months of being patient, the husband starts to feel it's time to re-establish the sexual routines that existed in Life Before Baby. The wife doesn't necessarily agree. Which is why sex is generally the biggest — and most emotionally charged — issue you have to confront when making the transition from partners to parents.

Jenny G. of Philadelphia, PA is an example of one new mom who didn't want to be pressured into resuming relations with her husband. "I basically lied to my husband and told him the doctor said we had to wait at least eight weeks (rather than the six the doctor suggested) before having sex, just because I didn't feel ready. Once I knew there wasn't any pressure to perform, I ended up feeling more willing."

New York City pediatrician and **BaBY Magazine** Advisory Board Member Paula Elbirt, M.D., who's been running new mothers' groups with a psychologist for more than a decade, says these feelings are common. "Most of the women in my groups say that, if they had 15 minutes to do something pleasurable, they'd rather have their nails done than contemplate the mess of sex. And by the mess, they mean physi-

cally, emotionally—in any manner of speaking the idea of sex was a mess."

Just Too Tired

The situation is different for every couple, of course, but...not so much. The pattern is almost universal, with individual personalities putting different takes on it. Most new moms say they are just too tired to have sex. The words "fatigue" and "exhaustion" come up repeatedly. For the first weeks after childbirth, most moms are so wrapped up in taking care of their new babies that they say they never even think about sex. During this time, the new dad is invited into the closed circle, but only as a parent, not as a lover.

By that six-week green light, most men are tired of waiting. They may also be feeling left out, perhaps jealous, of the affection and attention their wives are giving to the baby instead of to them.

Linda G. of Orlando, FL, had a typical experience. "I've been breastfeeding my son for several months, and I have absolutely no sex drive. By the end of the day, I just want to read a book and go to sleep. I was afraid to even cuddle with my husband, though I would have liked to, because I was afraid he would want more. Occasionally he would ask me what he could do to make me feel more in the mood.

My response would be that he should go in another room and let me go to sleep."

Linda's experience mirrors those of her peers across the country. New York City obstetrician Rebecca Brightman, M.D., says women's interest in sex tends to wane because of sleep deprivation, but also because of the change in their lifestyles, the demands placed on them by newborns, their lowered estrogen levels (which decreases libido), postpartum blues, problems with body image, and the emotional issues involved in dealing with their new situation. Usually, they feel better after about three months.

Another factor is what many experts refer to as the "touch quotient." You have literally had another person in your arms, on your body, all day long. You've benefited from the warmth of that, and even its sensuousness. But if you have an hour free before bedtime, you probably don't want to be touched anymore.

Felicia W. of Loveland, OH, is all touched out. She'll have sex once in a while, but refers to it as "sympathy for my husband." "I give in (to sex) occasionally because I feel guilty saying no to him every night. It takes the enjoyment out of it for me, then he gets resentful because he can tell I'm going through the motions. And I get resentful because he doesn't understand how tired I am."

Editor's Note: Because of the sensitive nature of this article, some names have been changed.



"Most of the women in my groups say that, if they had 15 minutes to do something pleasurable, they'd rather have their nails done than contemplate the mess of sex."

Monica B. of Los Angeles also doesn't enjoy sex as much post-baby. "I really miss the days when my husband and I would make out on the couch for hours. We can only have quickies now, which in all honesty don't really satisfy me. Romance now has to be planned, and that takes the fun out of it. If we do book a baby-sitter and plan an evening, there's more pressure to feel 'in the mood.'"

While the majority of women we talked to weren't as interested in sex after baby, a few were. Holly Y. of Houston had a bad pregnancy with her twins. "We weren't able to have sex for the entire pregnancy. By the time I delivered, we were both pretty anxious to get things going again."

Mary M. of Berkeley, CA, whose baby was premature and had to stay in the hospital, had a chance to catch her breath before jumping

into motherhood. She felt "free" making love with her husband without a baby around. "Because the baby wasn't in the house with us yet, I was still sleeping nights and wasn't as tired as I was after she came home from the hospital. As soon as I got her home, though, the story changed. I had no idea you could feel that tired and still function, and hormonally, I didn't want a lot of sex."

Tired, Shmired. What's the Real Reason You're not Interested in Sex?

Yeah, you're tired. Yeah, your hormones are in flux. But there's a great deal more going on when you decide that you do or don't want to have sex, and the same goes for your husband. First, there's the physical side of the story. At first, sex is often uncomfortable. Engorged breasts can be absolutely agonizing; even a mere accidental brushing against them can be painful. The cuts from C-sections, too, can be tender for several weeks. And your body isn't necessarily ready. Immediately after childbirth, the tissues in your vagina are thin and dry for at least four weeks and that makes intercourse uncomfortable. This situation lasts longer in breastfeeding women.

According to Ashley Hill, M.D., an obstetrician/gynecologist in Orlando, FL, most doctors advise waiting at least two weeks before trying if no cuts have been made, longer otherwise. Some will suggest waiting as long as six weeks; each woman's situation is different. For example, some episiotomies require two to three stitches that heal quickly, while others go into the rectum and necessitate 40 stitches, which take longer to heal. If you've had an episiotomy, never try before four weeks have passed and you've got your doctor's approval. C-section soreness often takes an entire six weeks to ease up. Many women prefer to wait until their bleeding stops, and that can take from two to six weeks.

But the soreness is just part of the story. According to our team of

What About Birth Control?

If you've always used condoms as birth control and you've still got a drawerful, you can get back in business any time you want. But many women who'd used other forms of birth control find that, when they finally are ready to be romantic again, they've got to stop mid-way because they realize they don't have any protection on hand. Talk about a mood-buster!

The best approach, of course, is to stock up on condoms—and foam—the same way you stock up on newborn diapers...before you leave for the hospital. Then discuss birth control with your doctor during his rounds the day after you deliver.

If you are breastfeeding, ignore well-meaning visitors who tell you nursing is a birth control method in itself. That's a myth. Women can, and do, get pregnant while breastfeeding every day. Breastfeeding does lower your chances of conceiving, but it does not eliminate them.

If you've used a diaphragm in the past and want to continue, talk to your doctor first. After all you've been through, your muscles will have stretched. Get re-fitted for a diaphragm four to six weeks after delivery, during your normal postpartum check-up.

If you're interested in the pill and you're breastfeeding, ask your doctor about the minipill. The minipill is made only with progesterone, and most research shows that it will not affect the quality or quantity of milk you produce, and it won't harm the baby. (Some mothers feel they do produce less milk when they're on the minipill, so talk with your physician first.) You can start taking the minipill three weeks after delivery. It should be effective a few days after that, but most doctors recommend waiting a couple of weeks to be safe. The minipill does have one down side: You must take it at exactly the same time every day, and that's not always easy to do when you've got a newborn in the house. Change to a full-strength pill when your child is weaned. Ortho Tri-Cyclen is a birth control pill that helps reduce mild to moderate acne while providing protection against pregnancy.

Women today have several other birth control options. Consider taking a Depo-Provera (SP) shot every three months, beginning two to three weeks after delivery, or have Norplant capsules inserted into your arms. Talk to your doctor about these and other options.

experts, one of the main problems is that you may each be resentful, even angry, at the other—or your new situation—but you're not expressing that anger.

For the woman, the resentment may stem from being left to do all the work with the baby. No matter how much you love taking care of your little bundle of joy, you may resent having to handle so much for so many hours every day. In most relationships, experts agree, no matter how involved the father is, the woman winds up chang-

ing most of the diapers, bathing the baby, keeping supplies stocked, hiring and managing the baby-sitters, planning playdates, dealing with older siblings, calming a fussy baby, etc. The majority of mothers even pack the diaper bag when dad takes baby on an outing!

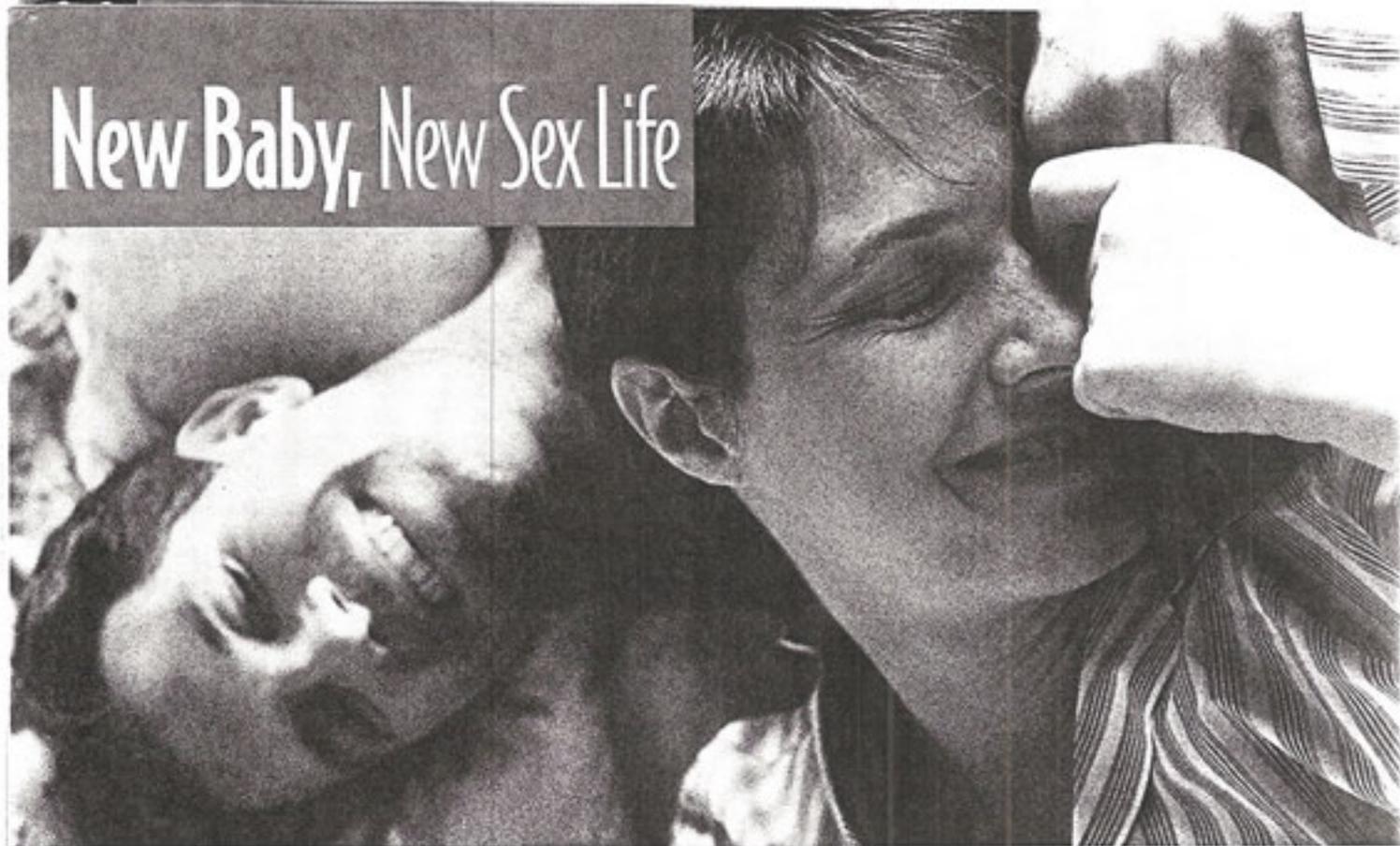
Aside from the new day-to-day chores mom has to contend with, they are also adjusting to their new lot in life, says Michelle Friedman, Ph.D., a psychologist in New York City. Especially during maternity leave, and longer if they've decided to stay home with baby for good, women can be affected by suddenly not having the social or financial status they did only weeks earlier. That can lead to a loss of self-esteem, which can lead to a mild depression and, ultimately, less interest in sex. Compounding their problems are the sheer disappointments that come with what is otherwise so blissful an experience: Being home alone with a baby all day can be boring and lonely.

What's worse is that, in our society, all this work is often looked down upon as an easy way out of real work, i.e. a job that pays money. Some women who've had careers are eager to be full-time moms but cringe at the thought of being called a housewife. Women in this situation must come to terms with this loss of status.

Husbands Feel Shut Out

Men have their own issues, and often women are too wrapped up in motherhood to notice these issues or appreciate how big they are. For example, husbands are often shunted aside when baby is born. After being the sole recipient of their wives' attention for so long, they're suddenly watching someone else get

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hugs, kisses, coos...and unlimited access to mom's breasts.

And when baby is finally asleep in the bassinet and the man comes for a hug, he hears, "Leave me alone! I don't want to be touched! I just want to go to sleep!"

When their wife is too busy with a baby to talk to them, men often lose their best, or only, companion. While women generally have friends or family with whom they can talk openly about private subjects, men often have only their wives as intimate friends. So when a baby is truly needy, and the man only feels needy, he loses out...and has no one to complain to.

Glen R. of Long Beach, CA, said he tried to be understanding when his wife wasn't in the mood, but it was upsetting. "I went from being number one in Marcia's life to number two overnight. I didn't start fights with Marcia about this, but, I admit, I did joke about it often to get my point across. I'd make comments in a sarcastic, off-handed sort of way."

After three months, Glen says their love life pretty much went back to the way it had been. "Initially all our actions revolved around the baby; then, with time, we began realizing that there are other things in life, too, and that our time is just as important."

When the wife stops working, men are also suddenly faced with a tremendous financial burden. It's scary to have to support a wife and baby! Professionals liken men's new financial responsibility to women's new responsibility for a helpless new baby. Both situations are scary and can make the person involved feel vulnerable.

Remember the Wonders of Romance

You may not be interested in resuming relations yet, but you can't make this issue go away. What's more, experts agree that you will benefit as much as your husband does from rekindling your romance. You chose your partner as your life-long companion because you love him. In the whirlwind

romance between a new mother and her infant, it's easy to forget that the primary relationship in any healthy family is supposed to be between the two parents. You're the team. Sure, some of his actions (or inactions) are making you angry. But that's part of the growth process you're going through at this time. You're probably angering him quite a bit too.

Compromise is a big part of this issue, of course. For you, compromise might mean having sex when you're not in the mood. For your husband, it might just mean not having sex the other 29 nights of the month...and agreeing not to bug you too often.

Second, don't feel you always have to say yes to sex. New York City therapist Helen Mandlin, CSW, says that would be self-abusive. "Say 'no' and tolerate your husband's annoyance. Then sometimes, maybe when you're not dying to have sex but kind of feel appreciative of other things your husband has done, say 'yes.'"

Admitting her technique has been called "antiquated," Dr. Elbirt suggests giving in to please your husband occasionally, and making an event out of it. "One week, plan to have sex—but don't tell your husband. Arrange for a sitter to take the baby out for two hours at least, and order in a dinner that's better than

pizza, and light some candles. If the baby throws up and the plans get scrapped, it's O.K. because your husband never knew and didn't come home all psyched up. You can surprise him another night.

And most of the time the men are perfectly happy with the surprise."

However you handle your per-

sonal situation, remember that your fatigue, your lack of sex drive, the strain between you and your husband are temporary.

The baby will not always wake up every single night. The baby will get a routine. So will you. No one would ever have a second kid if they remained this tired all the time. ♣

Talk About It!

Communication, experts say, is critical. That means to be open, to be honest, to share your feelings, and to encourage your husband to do the same. In a perfect marriage, in a perfect world, this alone will help you through this rough time.

Few marriages are quite that perfect, though. So if things get really rocky, or your efforts to communicate end in fights or silence, try some of these tactics offered by our pool of experts.

• **Say "I Feel," Not "You Did"**—Keep to what professionals call "I Statements," such as, "I feel underappreciated and I would feel better if I was sometimes thanked for taking care of the baby and the house. I feel so angry about this that I can't even imagine making love to you." Don't say, "You never think I do enough, you criticize my parenting too much, and you're really insensitive. And now you expect me to sleep with you?"

• **Act as a Mirror**—Counselors call this "reflection," and here's how it works: If you feel like you're being misunderstood or you don't like what your spouse is saying to you, don't get defensive. Instead, hold up an imaginary mirror by paraphrasing what he said, then ask if that's what he was really saying to you.

For example, say, "I hear that you're angry we haven't had sex in two weeks, that you feel pushed away by me and feel jealous of my attentiveness to the baby. Is that what you said?" With this technique, your spouse will feel heard, he'll be able to correct any misunderstandings and the whole discussion will slow down, instead of escalating into a fight.

• **Take a Time Out**—If either of you gets so angry that you start getting nasty, the other one should call a time-out. Then you will both stop talking and have a chance to calm down. Then, the person who called the time out must get back to the spouse later in the day to finish the discussion in a calmer fashion.

• **Take Time for Yourself**—To be the best parent possible and the best spouse possible, you each need some time by yourself and for yourself. That might mean an afternoon outing alone to the mall, lunch with a friend, an evening at a book group or even an hour lying out in the sun. For your husband, perhaps he'd like to play basketball with the guys, fiddle with his computer, or add pinstripes to his car. You both need to indulge yourselves occasionally sans kids. Nobody can spend all day, every day, giving to other people.

• **Take Time Together as a Couple**—You don't trust any strangers with your baby? Get over it. Find someone you can trust. No couple can keep the romance alive if the baby is always between them. The two of you need time to rekindle the romance now and then. And experts agree that the baby will not suffer from being away from the two of you for a few hours once a week. No mother is indispensable 24 hours a day. Call a nurse. Find a member of the seniors group at your place of worship. Call on single friends. Take turns baby-sitting with a neighbor.

• **Think Back**—Take time to reminisce. Each of you should take turns talking about some good times you had while you were courting. Mention specific things the other one did for you and talk about how much that meant. Then, you might be able to see how those gestures could happen in some form today.

• **Talk About the Good Things**—Yes, you've got to be open and honest about what you makes you angry. But if you and your husband also articulate the actions that you do appreciate, you'll both feel better about your relationship. And you might like each other enough, and feel safe enough together, to look forward to some sensuousness.

• **Complain to Your Friends**—You've both got days full of little frustrations and big ones. Don't take them out on each other, though. If you let off some steam to your mothers' group, and your husband does it over lunch with a friend from work, you can get your venting over with and have pleasant conversations with each other.

• **Deal with Planned Romance**—Don't wallow in the dearth of fun in planned sex. Instead, realize that, as an adult, you can't get everything you want, and learn to enjoy what you can have. If time and budget allows, get away from the kids overnight now and then. That will give you enough time to unwind, to psych yourself up...and maybe catch up on some sleep. But even a quiet Saturday evening of a rented movie and a quick tumble after the kids are in bed can be wonderful.