

# Remind Me - How Did We Get this Baby?

## Helping Moms and Dads to Nurture Their Sexual Relationship After Their Child Is Born

“For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (from the Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 5).

Have you and your spouse ever had this experience? You work hard all day taking care of your baby, and the day culminates in another hour to hour and a half of concerted efforts getting that baby to sleep. Finally, she’s snoozing peacefully. The couple both brush their teeth and move quickly toward the bed. Mom is looking forward to perhaps three hours of sleep before the next feeding. Daddy is looking forward to something else. He starts with a line: “Hey cutie, you sure look nice!” Mom, in her nursing bra and stained flannel nightgown, lifts her heavy eyelids and peers in her husband’s direction. She focuses on her husband’s face, as if she remembers who he is, but not how the two of them are connected, like someone who sees their UPS carrier at a baseball game. He leans closer for a kiss and a hug, not ready to give up the cause. “Mmm, you smell good, too” he says. “Let’s...you know”...

“Sleep like logs for the next two or three hours before the baby wakes up?” she responds hopefully. This disconnect between parents of a baby can create a lot of tension and dissatisfaction in the marriage, and yet the healthy resolution of this dilemma can bring the couple together into a stronger bond than they have ever experienced. The exhaustion, time constraints, and hormonal changes accompanying the birth of a baby are realities that can’t be ignored. There are also personal emotional changes happening for both parents as well. So although you are experiencing one of life’s most profound and beautiful mysteries, the two becoming one flesh in the form of this beautiful and precious life, it can be difficult to maintain your physical intimacy with each other.

Let’s take a little bit of time to notice the physical changes the mother of a baby is likely to be experiencing, and the likely effects of those changes. Hormone levels are high, and they have some complicated interactions. For instance, all that prolactin that aids in lactation, also has been associated with a withdrawal from sexuality. However, oxytocin, created by nipple stimulation, is associated with orgasm. What to make of these complicated interactions and complications? The mother is the best judge of whether her hormones might be getting in the way, or whether they may be helping her to enjoy being sexual again with her spouse. But these hormones are there for a purpose, and that is to help the mother’s body to recover from childbirth, and to help her breasts to make milk for the baby. They do not particularly signal that the parents shouldn’t or should be having relations at this time.

Also figuring highly in a mother’s mixed feelings about having relations with her husband, are some psychosocial factors. Body image in our culture is based on a woman looking as if she has never had children, and a new mom may have a hard time feeling “sexy” in her new shape. Never mind that other cultures value more rounded figures, and a more “fertile” appearance. Our media, clothing stores and peers tell us otherwise! New moms are also thinking about the very purpose of their bodies. Is your body made for nurturing a baby or for having sex? Does it make you a “bad Mom” or a “selfish Mom” to still be a sexual person, and to not be thinking about the baby 24/7? When you are entering a major new phase of life, it is natural to want to arrive at the “right” answer to questions like this. However, it is more important that you have the time you need to absorb the many life changes you are undergoing.

Adoptive Moms are going through many of the same psychosocial pressures. They are fatigued as well. You don’t have to have gone through pregnancy and delivery to feel drained by 2 a.m. feedings, psychosexual changes, and the pressure to be a perfect parent.

It may seem that Dads have it easy compared to Moms, but Dads are going through changes too, and Dads have a beautiful role to play in sustaining the change from couple to family with child(ren). Fathers have to absorb the reality that they now have a child depending on them for care and financial support, and they have to share their wife’s love and attention with the child. A man may also be feeling the weight of responsibility for his wife’s needs while she is recovering from the birth and adjusting to motherhood. Psychologically, he is also trying to absorb the fact that his wife is not just his sexual partner, but the mother of his child, and he may have recently become uncomfortable with her doing certain sexual behaviors with him. If he feels that he is making efforts to be supportive and loving during the many changes, and then his wife moves the sexual part of the relationship to the bottom of the priority list, he is likely to feel resentful.

As with so many marital issues, some of the responsibility for solving the problem lies with the wife, some with the husband, and some with both. We’ll start with what the wife can do to get the couple’s sexual frequency and enjoyment

back to a satisfactory level for both.

1. It helps if you can have empathy for your husband, and the changes he is going through, as well as his need to connect with you and communicate his love for you sexually. Verbalizing your continued desire for him can communicate that you want to have a deeper and more mature love relationship with him.
2. Address your personal history. Did your own Mom present herself to you as a nonsexual person? Did she communicate that sex was dirty? More seriously, was there sexual abuse in your past? Sexual abuse in your history causes sexual problems in marriage for many mothers of babies and young children, even when there has been a degree of healing some years before. In a broken world, being abused does not make a person strange or somehow “less than” other people. Sadly, being injured and sinned against is statistically normal in our broken world. But you can still reclaim your sexuality, and there are qualified counselors who can help you to do that. It’s not acceptable to have the abuse, or some other family history issue, affect you permanently. There are also people of faith in the community who will come alongside you to help you heal and be restored.
3. Consider exercise. Regular exercise, even if it is only once or twice a week, is an aphrodisiac because it gets you using your body just to feel good. The endorphins help you to feel positive about life and people, and this helps desire. Many moms benefit from core muscle rehabilitation, as in Kegel exercises. Even if you only have time to do a little bit of core muscle work, you can benefit just from focusing on the pelvic area as being for your husband and you to enjoy together, as contrasted to thinking about it as exclusively “the birth canal.”
4. The brief mention above of exercise begs the question of time management. This is huge for every couple, and it may be helpful to schedule time for sex. People think that sex should always be spontaneous, but it can be very romantic to look forward to sex just the way you looked forward to your dates in the past. You schedule every other priority, so why not sex with your husband? The wife’s responsibility would then be to do what she reasonably can to save some mental and physical energy for that scheduled sexual time. Do you need to put your feet up after dinner instead of doing the dishes? Is there something he might like to see you wearing at bedtime? You could put that out during the day, when you still have energy, and it can help you to maintain your resolve at bedtime if all you have to do is put it on.
5. Remember, it’s fine to take care of yourself. You are still a separate person, apart from your motherhood role, and it will soon feel that way too. In the meantime, don’t feel guilty taking some time here and there, or even scheduling time, for you to read, have a devotional time, take a walk, play on the computer, etc. If he offers to take care of the baby so that you can sleep in or do something you want to do, accept the offer! Notice your appearance prior to when you will see your spouse at the end of your workdays. A clean shirt, brushing your hair, and a little perfume or a breath mint can make you feel like his girlfriend again, and like a grown-up again. A quick shower or bath, or a short jog before dinner, can help you to recover from tactile overload.
6. Don’t overthink the physiology. You may be concerned that your arousal isn’t building as it did during your pre-baby lovemaking. The more you think about this during lovemaking, the more difficult it will be to sustain your arousal. What is it good to think about? Your husband’s good character traits, and how attractive he is to you is a good place to start. Talking to him, telling him that you are “spectatoring,” as this problem is called, and having him verbalize back to you, helps to get your mind off of “How am I doing?” and let’s you enjoy the moment more.

For both the new Mom and the Dad, some considerations include:

1. Preserve your auditory and visual privacy. The family bed is fine, but lovemaking is just for the two of you. It won’t damage the baby to see or hear what’s going on; the concern is more for the exclusivity of your special time to be maintained.
2. Remember that because you are committed to being faithful to each other, you hold the monopoly over your spouse’s sexual supply. Make the effort to respond positively to your spouse’s requests for lovemaking, even if you are tired or stressed. If you only respond positively three out of four of the times you are asked, that multiplies to approximately half of the time one of you will be disappointed. The Biblical reference to only abstaining by mutual consent and for a time (1 Corinthians 7:5) is wise in that it saves a lot of deep hurt. If you are enforcing a sort of “sexual economics” which includes debts, obligations, game-playing or paybacks for resentments, your marriage is hurting and may need professional help.

3. Forget the notion that all sexual touching must result in penetration, orgasms, etc. Expand your sexual repertoire to include enjoying whatever opportunities you may have to enjoy kissing, fondling, and intimate touching. Enjoy some nonsexual caring touch too, such as backrubs. This will give you more opportunities to develop sexual connection. The Song of Songs is full of references to kissing, fondling, intimate touch, and intimate gaze. If you are interrupted in your sexual encounter because the baby has a need, this is O.K., because the baby is a priority for both of you. You can resume lovemaking, or not; whatever you as a couple think is appropriate.

For the husbands, some suggestions would include:

1. This may sound simplistic, but... Do the things that turn your wife on, and don't do the things that don't turn her off. Be willing to help with chores when asked, or even without being asked. Notice when the baby has a need without having to be told. Do these things without expecting to be paid back sexually. A man who is a man, and is mature enough to respond to the needs of his family, is very attractive. A boy in a man's body, who expects to be catered to, is not sexy. If you truly don't want to help at home, the marriage may need some professional help towards mending this disconnect.

2. Understand that women report that they enjoy sex when it is "spontaneous," as opposed to when their husbands simply ask for sex. But what they really are responding to is when their partner has done things subtly, quietly, that allow her to be spontaneous. For example, the man who thinks ahead, taking the time to help his wife off with her coat when she arrives at home, helping her to finish folding the laundry that must be ready for tomorrow, lighting a candle, listening to her talk about her day, etc., will allow his wife to feel spontaneous and free to accept his advances.

3. Know that while your male arousal is more physical, a woman's arousal is more psychological. However, both spouses' level of arousal is more tied to the woman's psychological arousal. Showing consideration, character, and stability, as outlined in #1 and #2 above, usually helps to increase your wife's psychological arousal, and will make your lovemaking more exciting and satisfying for both of you.

Finally, for both of you, let yourselves off the hook! You are undergoing one of the most profound and life-changing experiences two people can ever share, and if that means that your sexual frequency declines temporarily because your baby needs attention, it's all right. If you allow your home to be messy or you eat too much take-out food, in order to carve out a little time for lovemaking, that's all right too. If the sexual "fireworks" are not there at this time because the nursing hormones are affecting responsiveness, that's O.K. too. Each couple is free to set their own priorities. In a culture which places pressure on people to make everything a priority – perfect resume, perfect home, perfect body, perfect parenting, it takes guts to step back from that and set your own agenda as a family unit. As you cleave to each other and nurture your child, you will create a culture within your own family unit, one based on your shared values and experiences, that will be an invaluable support for you and your child.

Resources:

And Baby Makes Three: The Six-Step Plan for Preserving Marital Intimacy and Rekindling Romance After Baby Arrives, by John M. Gottman, Ph.D., and Julie Schwartz Gottman, 2007

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