

## Coitus interruptus

It's in the small print when you become a parent: the baby comes, your sex life ends. David Cohen on why men feel cheated

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**David Cohen**

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"There were five of us, all first-time fathers, having a drink one night when a beautiful woman walked by. I looked up from my beer and mumbled 'sex'. Then someone else said, 'I remember sex.' And another said, 'I remember sex, too.' Then it slowly started to come out. When did you last have sex? Four months ago? Six months ago? One father hadn't done it in 16 months. It was a revelation to know we were all going through the same thing."

Jonathan, a 33-year-old businessman from Brighton, says that since the birth of his daughter nearly two years ago, his wife has had no interest in sex. "I lie in bed and say to her: 'I know what it is - you're not attracted to me any more.' She says no, it's nothing personal, that she loves me, but there's no demonstration of that fact. We used to have a vigorous sex life. To have the tap turned off after 10 years together is the most painful, devastating thing."

This tale of "the baby came but the sex went" will be instantly recognisable to many fathers. But the fact that it is still taboo for men to admit that they haven't had sex for two weeks, let alone two years, means that it is rarely discussed openly, much less recognised as a widespread problem.

According to Ann Herreboudt, a postnatal counsellor, nearly half of the first-time mothers she sees in her north London practice have no sexual relations with their husbands for between six months and a year.

"Most say their husbands are fed up, but only some are concerned by it," she says. "That's a big mistake, because more marriages break up in the first 18 months after childbirth than at any other time. And it's safe to assume that sex, or the lack of it, is a major contributing factor."

The modern child-centred approach to parenting, coupled with the fact that women are encouraged to breastfeed for as long as possible, often means that the sex life of the couple is put on the back burner. Is this an unspoken, yet thoroughly normal, phenomenon to which the new father should simply adjust? Or is it an issue, as Herreboudt suggests, that should be addressed before it gets out of hand?

The problem begins, say experts, with the unrealistic expectations that are nurtured in the months before childbirth. During pregnancy, partners often experience an intense intimacy. They pick out the crib, prepare the nursery, traipse along to antenatal classes, agonise over names. There arises what Christopher Clulow, director of the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute in London, describes as "the fantasy of fusion", a belief that they will go through the parenting experience together.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Come the birth, mother and father are propelled into different orbits. In the postnatal maelstrom of breastfeeding angst, painfully engorged breasts and sleepless nights, sex for the mother becomes an expendable option. For the father, displaced from the centre of the family, sex may take on added significance.

Martin, a first-time father who has not had intercourse with his wife for 10 months, explains how he interprets his wife's behaviour: "It's not just a sexual thing. It's the fact that my wife puts my daughter first, second and third. The child is satisfying all her needs. Her disinterest in sex has become a metaphor for her disinterest in me."

"When sex becomes a problem over a prolonged period, women need to ask themselves why they're not making space in their lives for their partner," says Yehudi Gordon, a London consultant obstetrician. "These are often the mums who breastfeed for years and who, on the surface, appear to be the most wonderful mothers. But what these mothers overlook is that the best thing they can give their new child is two parents in a stable marriage. That is more important than how long they breastfeed."

But what is it about becoming a mother that puts sex so firmly off the agenda?

Certainly, say mothers, there is a physical component. "I am simply exhausted at the end of a day attending to the needs of my son, and the last thing I can think about is attending to the needs of my husband," says Lauren, 34, a first-time mother whose son is nine months. They also acknowledge a powerful biological component: the release of prolactin while breastfeeding is said to depress the mother's libido. For others, the response is intuitive. "I associate sex with pregnancy and the last thing I want is to fall pregnant again," says Gill, 32. "Somehow my body is asking me to wait."

Karen, 40, whose third child is four-and-a-half months, puts it baldly: "My experience is that while I am breastfeeding, it is hormonal. My membranes are very dry - it's just not conducive to feeling like sex. But emotionally, too, I'm engaged in what I can only describe as an exclusive love affair with my baby. This is what the baby needs and it's what I need. For the first few months, at least, there is simply no space for my husband."

Some men make matters worse by coming on too strong, too quickly. Jonathan admits that his impatience to resume sex just five weeks after the birth did not help. But he questions the role played by society in fostering those misconceptions in the first place. "Why didn't they warn us about this in antenatal classes?" he asks.

Antenatal teacher Ilana Machover maintains that sex, or the lack of it, is often discussed as a potential problem in antenatal classes. "But couples are so fixed on the birth, it's difficult for them to see even five minutes beyond it. Later, they forget that anything was said at all."

So how should men tackle the sex impasse once it becomes a problem in their relationship? Relate suggests that the couple seek counselling if sex remains a problem for more than a year after childbirth.

"A significant number of couples trace their sex problems back to the postnatal period," says Julia Cole, a psychosexual therapist with Relate. "Often, they haven't made love for a long time and are having difficulty restarting their sex life. We ask the couple to lower their expectations, to find ways of being intimate other than intercourse. Some women are afraid that intimacy will lead to sex, so they withdraw physical affection entirely. The answer is to set limited achievable goals that lead the couple in the right direction."

"No couple is the same after they've had a baby," she goes on. "It's about the couple's ability to accommodate change, to allow their relationship to move on. Most couples don't realise that their sexual relationship is always going to be shifting, that what worked two years ago is not the answer today."

People need to tune into the ebb and flow of sexual intimacy, says Cole. "Many people believe it is something that is switched on at puberty and runs and runs," she says, "but the reality is different. There are times in a couple's life - during stress, ill health, bereavement, and after childbirth - where there is more ebb than flow. The problem is made worse when couples hold unrealistic expectations and put themselves under too much pressure to conform to a mythical norm."

Jonathan has contemplated calling Relate, but he remains sceptical of the idea of "being intimate in other ways".

"I don't think sex is something you can half have," he says.

What about, as one parenting manual suggests, courting her again?

"If that is what it takes, I'll do it," he says, perking up momentarily.

"It's hard," he sighs. "Sometimes I feel like my wife is giving me a protracted goodbye. And even though I talk to my friends, and they tell me that, in time, the situation will correct itself, that I must be patient..."

"And even though in my head I know they are right, it sits in my stomach, this feeling of rejection, and longing, and deep, deep loneliness."

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