

Relationship Between Partners

By Alyssa Berlin | PsyD



CREATE YOUR BLESSINGS

Yes, you can have a new baby and keep the love and intimacy in your relationship – Dr. Alyssa Berlin, a psychologist who works primarily with expectant couples and new parents, explains how.

As you prepare for the arrival of a new baby, it's natural to think about the people you love and how your relationships with the pivotal people in your life may change as your journey into parenthood begins. After all, each new addition to a family creates a ripple effect, adding an exponential number of new relationships – some you may not even be able to imagine yet – to your circle of family and friends.

Even in your household, it's no longer just your relationship with your partner and your partner's relationship with you that matter. Now it's those two relationships plus your relationship with the baby, your partner's relationship with the baby, your collective relationship with the baby, and your baby's relationship with you as a parenting "unit" that matter. One new arrival adds six new relationships, to be negotiated under one roof! Are you starting to suspect this might change the existing dynamic between you and your partner as a twosome? You'd be absolutely correct, and that's without adding parents, in-laws, old friends, new "mom and dad" friends and baby playmates to the mix. (Older siblings or pets at home? Get ready for even more adjustments...)

Most new parents will relate that their relationships with certain key people in their lives changed dramatically as they went from pregnancy to parenthood. Over this three-part blog series, I plan to talk about the impact of your pregnancy and postpartum transition on these significant people. Specifically, I will talk about your relationship with your partner, your parents and in-laws, and your circle of friends.

Let's focus first on your partner, because before there was a baby, it was just the two of you. It's inevitable that relationships with partners change dramatically as parenthood becomes part of your relationship. In addition to the friendship, love, and support that hopefully you mutually enjoyed until baby made three, you are adding the responsibility of taking care of a newborn and ensuring their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing into adulthood and perhaps even beyond. Yikes!

New parents typically talk about the loss of freedom that comes with having a baby. They are usually referring to the inability to go out on spontaneous date nights whenever the mood strikes them, which is often a very challenging adjustment for new parents to make. The problem is often compounded when there's a disagreement between partners about how much of their former night life should be traded for diaper duty and how much they should just forge ahead, baby in tow, trying to keep up with their previous social calendar. As you can imagine, this can cause tremendous stress for new parents and requires communication, flexibility, and the ability to compromise to find a happy medium.

There is another loss of freedom that happens when a baby comes onto the scene, and that is the freedom to talk freely, to have a meaningful conversation, or to be intimate with each other without being interrupted by the needs of the newest and most demanding member of the family. So much for the newcomer having to start at the bottom of the totem pole – at least for a time, your baby will probably rule your home from the moment he or she arrives!

It is very common for new parents to allow their lives to become almost totally baby-centered; it's hard to ignore a child who is calling out their needs and demands at the top of their little lungs. God bless them – there is no mistaking that they want to get and keep your attention, and hopefully they will want to remain emotionally close to you even when you're old and gray. Just remember that before there was the baby, there was just your partner and you, and it is crucial to continue to nurture that primary relationship and not get sucked into what I call 'the baby vortex.'

I've seen from my practice that it's easy to get lost. That sweet, innocent, adorable baby looking up at you with total love and devotion... staring back is addictive, and it's very hard to look away. But this is when the non-birthing partner can begin to feel left out and neglected; it's hard

to compete with a baby, and ideally, our partners shouldn't ever have to feel the need to compete. It is vitally important for the health and happiness of your family – all three of you – that partners make time just for each other and fight to hold on to the amazing bond that led you to decide “yes, we can do this parenting thing” in the first place. This requires you both to work every day on your relationship, and this can be achieved in many surprisingly simple ways if you remember your two new best friends: creativity and flexibility.

It's natural to mourn the ease and freedom of your former life, but I want you to remember that you can still do and have everything you used to enjoy in your relationship with your partner if you remember creativity and flexibility. That often means planning ahead: pick a special time to sit down and talk with each other every day, to make sure you stay connected and up-to-date with what is going on in your partner's world.

Plan ahead for date nights, too. A family member, friend, babysitter, doula, or anyone who can watch your baby for you on a weekly basis will help keep romance part of your reality. And be creative – even if you can't eat at your favorite restaurant and then hit the movie theatre, there's a good chance you can still order take-out and work through your Netflix queue while cuddled up on the couch – even if one or both of you quickly falls asleep from exhaustion.

One last thing – don't be afraid to plan ahead for sex. Sure, picking one night a week to set aside for physical intimacy isn't all that spontaneous, but it's certainly better than no intimacy at all – and there's nothing to stop you getting down to business during the rest of the week if the mood strikes and the baby sleep-gods are cooperating!

All of these things will feed the foundation of your relationship, making your partnership stronger as you grow closer together and ensuring that your home is still filled with the friendship, love, admiration, and overall positive vibe that made you feel happy to be home before the baby arrived.

Check out the next two installments, where I explore how a new baby impacts your relationships with your parents, in-laws, and friends.