

ADJUSTING TO PARENTHOOD

Becoming new parents is one of the most significant transitions in life, and most couples find it challenging. Many adjustments have to be made to successfully navigate the transition to parenthood.

Preparing for the arrival of a new baby is a good time to reflect on how life will change when we become parents. Having a baby is an exciting time but the changes the baby brings often take new parents by surprise, in most cases giving rise to some level of stress and anxiety.

Expectant parents may believe that the baby will not have a huge impact on their lives or that they will be able to manage more in their lives than is realistic (e.g. tidy house, settled baby, great cooking, going out, looking great). In fact, having a baby causes significant changes, many of which are unexpected and involve a degree of loss and grief. For example, loss of freedom, work identity, financial independence and social contacts is not uncommon. Most new parents find some aspects of adjusting to life with a new baby difficult.



How do we know how to be parents?

It is in the context of the family we grew up in, that we learn many things about human relationships and how we fit into the world. We don't always know what these things are, but they tell us about how we should behave and how to relate to other people. For example, we learn about the value of ourselves to the people around us and what we need to do to solve problems and communicate our needs or feelings.

It can be helpful for the pregnant couple to think about what experiences they had growing up in their own family and what their parents have taught them about being a mother or a father. What they have learnt in their own families will affect how they become a parent and it will be very different for both of them. For example, we know that when people are faced with stress, such as having a baby, it is natural to go back to these early patterns of coping, even if they don't necessarily want to.

Talking about these different experiences as a couple and what each individual has learnt about parenting, can help the couple see their similarities and differences as they become new parents. Talking about how they would like to be as parents can help to relieve some of the stress that goes with being new parents. It can help to do this with someone they trust, a family member, friend or counsellor.

It can also be helpful to talk about what will be important to the couple when they become new parents. The following prompts can help shape this discussion.

What is important to each of you?

- A strong couple relationship
- A strong sense of self as individuals
- A healthy relationship with your baby and confident parenting
- Acknowledgement that it will take time to settle as new parents and get to know your baby



Strategies you can try

- Have adequate time to yourselves as individuals, away from the baby, particularly to adjust to the changes and losses that come with parenthood
- Have regular time to talk and listen to each other without distraction, about your day, how you are feeling and what you might be concerned about
- Have enjoyable time together as a couple
- Have supportive relationships with friends and family, as a couple and as individuals
- Make sure you eat well, participate in regular exercise, and have adequate sleep

What practical steps will you need to put into place to achieve what you want?

- Working long hours as a new father or committing to extra study as you learn to juggle looking after a baby, family life and work life is not ideal
- Remember it is okay for both new parents to take time out from caring for the baby, so don't hesitate to call upon offers from trusted babysitters to help make this possible
- Small changes, consistently over time, will help to bring about sustainable changes that can help create healthy relationships, and also help prevent symptoms of postnatal depression



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