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Marital Satisfaction After Children. Is it Possible?

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Pregnant.

As soon as I saw the small word flash across the pregnancy test, I was overcome with emotion. At first, I was relieved to have an explanation for the terrible nausea that I had been suffering through for several weeks. However, that relief quickly transitioned to a feeling of complete shock—that unique blend of joy and excitement mixed with a sense of overwhelming terror.

My husband and I had wanted to start our family within the coming year, but suddenly the timing seemed too soon; I was young, unprepared, and nervous about how our relationship would change. Certainly, I was thrilled at the prospect of becoming a mother, and our highest ambition as a couple to become parents was about to become a reality. However, as time passed, I was bombarded with information detailing an inevitable decline in marital satisfaction with the birth of a child and became increasingly worried. The more I learned, the more I became convinced that having this baby would deeply and negatively impact our happy marriage, and I was devastated.

Impact on Couples

Marital research tends to show that after the birth of a first child, a general decrease in marital satisfaction is to be expected. While current literature presents the idea that wives are typically more susceptible to lowered satisfaction, it is normal for some husbands to experience this as well. These decreases in marital satisfaction have been measured from mild to severe and can vary depending on the individual couple.

A variety of differences might explain this decrease, including unrealistic media portrayals of parenthood that prompts unhealthy expectations, the couple’s necessity to rearrange household and domestic tasks in the marriage, changes in the couple’s sexual routines, the socioeconomic status of the couple at the time of pregnancy and birth of the child, and others. While anticipating some of these adjustments, it is no wonder that some couples fear the transition to parenthood.

Some couples may wonder whether the best days of our relationship over once the baby comes. Will our marriage be happy or strained after our family expands? As I found myself asking these same questions, I found research that not only allayed my fears but provided me with practical help, allowing us to confidently move forward in both our marriage and new path to parenthood.

One of the first things that I learned is that while a decline in marital satisfaction is considered normal after children are born, it is certainly not an inevitable fate that all couples must suffer.

One of the first things that I learned is that while a decline in marital satisfaction is considered normal after children are born, it is certainly not an inevitable fate that all couples must suffer. Research has shown that while most couples will experience some small decline in marital satisfaction after the birth of their first child, only a small group of couples will experience an intensely unhappy transition. This small percentage of outlier couples have sometimes biased the average rates of reported marital satisfaction, which has resulted in the overall, somewhat inaccurate report of unhappy marital transitions in these studies.

While this does mean that some couples will truly struggle with the transition to parenthood, and perhaps popular media intends for us to believe this is always the case, a strong decrease in marital happiness is not the reality for most couples. Many make this transition by making needed adjustments and remembering that the transition to parenthood is handled differently by each couple depending upon their preparation.

Protective Factors

In combating decreases in marital satisfaction, two main protective factors have been found to help couples best prepare to become parents. First, researchers have found that the individual characteristics of each spouse and their
interactions with one another have a large impact on how well the couple transitions to parenthood. Couples who consistently show awareness, empathy, and concern for one another in everyday life, as well as those who frequently display warmth and affection, will typically experience maintained or increased marital satisfaction even with a newborn baby.9

In anticipation of the time when baby makes three, couples can practice deliberately applying these positive qualities (as well healthy doses of forgiveness when mistakes are made) in their relationships to both foster greater love for one another and to safeguard their marital satisfaction. While this may seem like a simple solution, evidence repeatedly demonstrates that even the smallest intentional efforts to bring warmth and positivity into a relationship can have monumental effects as couples navigate their new relationship as co-parents.10

The second main protective factor to help couples with the transition to parenthood is spirituality. Couples that actively seek spiritual or religious growth during pregnancy and parenthood both individually and as a couple often find deeper meaning and satisfaction in their new roles as parents and experience an increase in love and joy in their marriage.11

Through the lens of spirituality, couples have the capability of viewing parenting as altruistic and important on a greater scale than just mortality, and this can offer them the strength to weather the difficulties that do arise when adjusting to life with a newborn. When couples strive to find greater purpose outside of themselves in their role as parents, they are rewarded with deepened love for each other and for their baby.

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Now nearly two years after that memorable day, I discovered I was pregnant, my husband and I are enthusiastically parenting our energetic son and can truly say we are more in love than ever before. While our lives as parents usually involve far less sleep and spontaneity than before our baby was born, we have found that our communication has improved, our dedicated “alone” time is more meaningful, and our joy is deeper. It has been a beautiful (and oftentimes humbling) experience to learn to love one another not only as husband and wife but as parents as well.

As we strive to conscientiously apply our newfound knowledge, we have found greater patience, happiness, and love in our marriage. Though it has certainly taken some adjustment and not every moment is blissful and easy, I am now confident that our baby is doing more than detracting from the relationship that my husband and I share: he is improving it in ways we never could have imagined.

Couples can find solace in this truth: there is every reason to hope for and work for a happy and meaningful marriage as they transition to parenthood. Not only is there research concluding that increased marital satisfaction is possible, but we are ultimately in control of our own marriages and can intentionally prepare well together to respond to all of life's transitions. We can view parenthood not as an end to our blissful days as a couple but as the start of a new adventure filled with more meaning and joy than we could possibly imagine.

Alyssa Sabey, recently graduated from BYU and is currently attending graduate school alongside her husband. She thoroughly enjoys spending time chasing her energetic toddler.
Endnotes


