

Strategies for New Parents in the Hope Focused Couples Approach

Joni L. Utley and Anica C. Mulzac

Hope Project, Regent University

Couples' Adjustment to Parenthood

Despite many positive effects and rewards of parenthood, approximately 50% of couples report deterioration in their relationship satisfaction after having a baby (Petch & Halford, 2008). The crying, erratic sleep patterns and 24-7 needs of infants are stressful for parents and often result in taxed coping abilities, persistent fatigue/exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and depression (Meijer & Van den Wittenboer, 2007). The effects of adjustment to the new infant(s) contribute to problems in the couple relationship; in addition, there are at least five other major changes associated with new parenthood that contribute to relationship deterioration: changes in gender roles/work distribution, decreased positive communication, decline in disposable income, reduced couple quality time, and decreased sexual satisfaction (Petch & Halford, 2008).

Changes in Gender Roles

Christian women have more of a tendency to identify with traditional gender roles; however, some research shows that most Christian women identify with feminist ideals, particularly ethnic minority women (Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, & Leathers, 2008). The introduction of a baby into the family tends to cause gender roles to become more traditional (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). This can be problematic to many women, regardless of their prior stance on gender roles, as they may feel their husbands are not participating at a satisfactory level in the additional workload imposed by a child (child care adds approximately 35 hours/week to the average couple household, Craig & Bittman, 2005). Indeed, research has repeatedly shown that women carry the bulk of the workload related to child care irrespective of whether women are employed outside the home (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Petch & Halford, 2008). Kowalski (2007) suggests that more positive mental health outcomes are achieved for women whose husbands assist with childcare.

Communication Patterns

With the introduction of a new child into the home, there is less available for distraction-free communication. Couples-focused communication, self-disclosure, and praise all decrease as well (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). In addition to decreased positive and focused couple interactions, there tends to be an increase in negativity and conflict (Petch & Halford, 2008). According to Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere (2000), positive communication specifically indicating the husband's fondness of the wife and both partners' attention to each other and awareness of their relationship are critically important in terms of predicting marital satisfaction. The communication of negative feelings about each other and the marriage predict declines in satisfaction (Shapiro et al., 2000).

Declines in Disposable Income, Quality Time and Sexual Satisfaction

For most couples, the introduction of a child results in less financial resources due to increased costs or adjustments in working hours to accommodate child-care (Thomas & Sawmill, 2005). This creates stress for couples as they have tighter budgets, and it may reduce the ability for them to participate in previously enjoyed activities. Couples' quality time becomes scarce with the addition of a new child. Research has shown a correlation between the birth of a new child and reduced frequency

and quality of couple time (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983). In addition, sexual satisfaction generally decreases after childbirth; most couples report declines with sexual dissatisfaction persisting from 6 months postpartum to 4 years after birth (von Sydow, 1999).

Problems during Pregnancy

Unless a couple is planning on adopting a child, the pregnancy itself contributes to additional challenges that couples transitioning to parenthood face even before the child arrives. Some research shows that problems during pregnancy predict future problems (Belsky & Pensky, 1998). Thus, the counselor may be able to assist in prevention/mitigation if the couple is in treatment during this stage. Typically the last trimester of pregnancy accompanies lower levels of physical affection and higher levels of conflict (Houts et al., 2008). Women will usually begin to experience decreased marital satisfaction during this stage of the pregnancy, followed by men (Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

Therapist Awareness

Many psychologists and researchers believe that the likelihood of future divorce is highly influenced by the couple's ability to maintain marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Also, the wife's marital satisfaction after the arrival of the first baby has been shown to predict divorce in many couples (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; and Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). Thus, a critical task for the therapist in working with a couple transitioning into parenthood is to include not only psychoeducation about the transition to parenthood, but to also foster the marital satisfaction with potential special needs of wives.

Strategies for Therapists

- Provide psychoeducation about the typical impact parenthood has on couples. Normalize their struggles and motivate them to make changes to prevent continued marital dissatisfaction. Instill hope and a sense of efficacy in them that they are able to make necessary changes. For spiritual couples, information can be framed in terms of a spiritual struggle, character-building experience, and draw on parallels of the parental roles of God in their lives and their upcoming parental role with their new child.
- Facilitate a discussion regarding gender roles with the couple in a non-biased way. Educate them about typical changes with increased responsibilities of childcare. Perhaps share research findings with them regarding this issue. Help them to effectively communicate their expectations to one another and assist them in adjusting any unreasonable or detrimental expectations.
- Emphasize the importance of positive communications, particularly during this time. Strategies from the Hope-focused approach such as Blessings/Blessings & Qualities and Love Bank/Motivations (Worthington, 1999) should be considered as weekly homework assignments to increase positive emotions.
- Help the couple to recognize the positive aspects of their relationship, as well as the positive contributions that each make to parenting, since the negative factors often overshadow the positive.

Case Vignette

Tony and Lisa have been married for two years and recently had their first child. Although the couple is excited about being new parents, the strain of parenthood has begun to take a toll on their relationship. Tony and Lisa have continued working full time at their family-owned restaurant since the birth of their child, and they are overwhelmed by their responsibilities both at home and at work. Their five-month-old son, Chris, is a fussy baby and requires a lot of attention to be calmed. Chris's constant crying significantly cuts into the couple's nightly sleep, which has led to unending fatigue, shorter tempers, and impatience with each other. Both Tony and Lisa are unsatisfied with the present state of their marriage. The couple decided to seek therapy after having an argument in which Tony expressed regret over deciding to have a child, and Lisa complained that Tony did little to help her care for their son or complete household chores.

When asked by the therapist to describe their lives, the couple reported that their life felt chaotic and out of their control. The wife expressed feeling helpless to improve the problems in her marriage, and questioned her husband's commitment to their family. After being prompted to explain her reasons for questioning her husband's commitment, Lisa reported that her husband neglects their son and seldom helps with household chores. "Whenever I ask him to do anything, change a diaper or wash the dishes or anything, he always comes up with some excuse for why he can't help. I have to do everything! I wouldn't have had a baby if I thought I would have to raise him alone." Tony responded to Lisa's claims by stating that he loved his wife and son, but felt incapable of appropriately tending to their needs. He claimed, "I don't know what to do, whenever I try to help she yells and says that I'm doing it wrong. She says that I don't do anything, but I do what I can. Chris is a handful sometimes, and when he cries I just have no clue how to make him better." After his initial session with the couple, the therapist felt that much of the couple's marital difficulties stemmed from their parental woes. His goal for therapy was to educate the couple on the negative impact that parenthood could have on the relationship of first time parents, as well as the surrounding factors that can further undermine marital satisfaction. He also hoped to help the couple learn techniques to soothe their cranky child, have better communication, and better manage the stressors in their lives.

Script

Lisa: Last night I only slept for two hours because Chris had colic, I couldn't get him to sleep. Tony just stayed in bed. He didn't even get up to try to help. Never mind that I had to be at the restaurant early this morning so forget about sleeping in.

Tony: I did get up, I made the bottle for him and you got mad because you said it was too hot. I tried to help but you had such an attitude, I decided to go back to bed. It's not like I slept either, with the baby crying all night.

Therapist: Lisa how did you feel when Tony tried to help with the baby last night?

Lisa: I was happy at first, but I could tell that all he wanted to do was go back to bed.

Therapist: Lisa you mentioned earlier in the session that Tony never helps you care for Chris, but you just indicated that he tried to help you last night and that made you happy.

Lisa: Yeah it did.

Therapist: So then maybe saying that he never helps may be a little strong.

Lisa: I guess....Tony does try, I have to admit that. Even though I could tell it's hard for him, he does make an attempt sometimes and I love that about him, I do.

Therapist: Tony, tell me more about your feeling lost about caring for Chris.

Tony: Lisa's so good with Chris I'm amazed how she's able to calm him down when he's fussy. I don't know how she does it, when I try I feel like such a bad father. I don't know the first thing about babies, and I seem to make things worse whenever I get involved. I see other fathers and they all seem so great with their kids, unlike me.

Therapist: You know Tony it is not uncommon for fathers, especially first time fathers, to feel incapable of caring for their infants. You are definitely not the only father to ever feel this way, even though at times it may seem that way.

In subsequent sessions Tony and Lisa worked to improve their communication, as they realized that they shared many of the same feelings of inadequacy and helplessness as first-time parents. The therapist continued to provide psychoeducation on the impact that parental challenges can have on marital satisfaction and the importance of acknowledging each partner's positive contributions to the relationship. The therapist also sought to instill hope in the couple by helping them to approach their problems as a united team and to view their issues as factors over which they do have the power to control and ultimately change. By the termination of therapy, the couple reported that they were both committed and increasingly satisfied with their marriage. Although they continued to struggle with satisfaction over dividing the household labor, Tony has grown more confident as a father, and become more involved in parenting. Lisa has learned to be more observant of Tony's efforts to help and no longer feels neglected by her husband.

Teaching Points

- ❖ The therapist helped Lisa to reduce her use of generalizing words such as "always" by pointing out inconsistencies in her statements. He also helped Lisa to acknowledge the positive contributions that Tony made to their relationship, rather than only highlighting the negative. Her attributions were also negative, that he didn't desire to help out. It is important to help clients develop a well-rounded view of their situations, as they are more likely to attend to the negative factors and overlook the positive.

- ❖ The therapist validated Tony's feelings of inadequacy and used psychoeducation to normalize his feelings. By normalizing and validating the client's feelings, rapport is not only increased, but the clients are able to develop a different perspective of themselves and their situations.

- ❖ Since it is easy for the couple to become consumed by their parental difficulties, they can lose sight of their marital relationship; thus it is important for therapy to focus on highlighting the strengths of the marriage. Therapists should encourage the couple to acknowledge the positive qualities of their relationship, using effective interventions such as Lovebank/Motivations (Worthington, 1999) to increase their positive interactions.
- ❖ Therapists should consider incorporating parental skills training into therapy as a means providing the couple with adaptive tools for parenting and increasing their sense of efficacy to manage parental stressors. Since research has shown that parenthood could have negative effects on the couple's relationship, failure to acknowledge the influence of parental difficulties on the marriage could undermine therapeutic gains.

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