Changes for the couple transition to parenthood:

By Dr Catherine Houlston1, Dr Lester Coleman1, Jan Mitcheson2

1Senior Research Officer, OnePlusOne, 2Head of Practice Development, OnePlusOne

There are a number of major changes new parents encounter with the birth of their first baby that can contribute to a decline in relationship satisfaction. These include dealing with the demands of a new baby and associated fatigue, increased conflict and decline in couple-focused communication, an increase in traditional gender roles and imbalance in domestic chores, decreased time together as a couple and changes in sexual intimacy. However, not all couples experience relationship declines during this time. This article will discuss some of the risk and protective factors associated with changes in relationship satisfaction following the birth of a first child. Such understanding highlights ways practitioners can help strengthen relationships as couples become parents.

Introduction

The transition to parenthood is recognised as a pivotal life course transition. For some, becoming a parent for the first time may be a profound stressor associated with negative long-term consequences, and for others it is an important source of wellbeing (Kluwer, 2010). Too often perhaps, the mother is considered in isolation from the key people in her life, and especially her partner. In this article, leading researchers from the relationships organisation, OneplusOne, examine the threats to couples when a new baby arrives.

Many new parents experience a decrease in relationship satisfaction following the birth of the first child

Research suggests that many new parents experience a general decrease in relationship satisfaction following the birth of the first child (Doss et al., 2009; Mitnik, Heyman & Slep, 2009; Twenge, Campbell & Foster, 2003). Although the figures for new parents who report such a decline vary both within and across studies, between 40 and 70 per cent of couples experience some decline in relationship satisfaction following the birth of a first child. A decline in relationship quality over time is also common among non-parents; however, it is greater and more sudden for those who become parents (Twenge et al., 2003).

Changes facing new parents

Research suggests that many new parents experience a general decrease in relationship satisfaction following the birth of the first child (Petch & Halford, 2008). The quality of the couple relationship in turn can have an effect on mothers’ and fathers’ wellbeing (Umberton, Pudrovksa & Reczek., 2010; Figuerido et al., 2008; Condon, Boyce & Corkindale, 2004; Matthey et al., 2000) their role as parents (Ponnet et al., 2013) as well as child adjustment (Reynolds et al., in press; Bean & Vira, 2005; Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Therefore, it is important to recognise which couples may be at risk of declining relationship quality in the transition to parenthood and what can be done to strengthen relationships during this time. This article will identify some of the key changes for couples and challenges they face in becoming parents before highlighting interventions to improve the couple relationship during this time.

Many new parents experience a decrease in relationship satisfaction following the birth of the first child

engage in less positive interactions, which can impact on their relationship satisfaction or quality (Petch and Halford, 2008). The quality of the couple relationship in turn can have an effect on mothers’ and fathers’ wellbeing (Umberton, Pudrovksa & Reczek, 2010; Figuerido et al., 2008; Condon, Boyce & Corkindale, 2004; Matthey et al., 2000) their role as parents (Ponnet et al., 2013) as well as child adjustment (Reynolds et al., in press; Bean & Vira, 2005; Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Therefore, it is important to recognise which couples may be at risk of declining relationship quality in the transition to parenthood and what can be done to strengthen relationships during this time. This article will identify some of the key changes for couples and challenges they face in becoming parents before highlighting interventions to improve the couple relationship during this time.

Changes facing new parents

Research suggests that many new parents experience a general decrease in relationship satisfaction following the birth of the first child (Doss et al., 2009; Mitnik, Heyman & Slep, 2009; Twenge, Campbell & Foster, 2003). Although the figures for new parents who report such a decline vary both within and across studies, between 40 and 70 per cent of couples experience some decline in relationship satisfaction in the first year of parenthood (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). A decline in relationship quality over time is also common among non-parents; however, it is greater and more sudden for those who become parents (Twenge et al., 2003).

The major changes new parents encounter with the birth of their first baby can contribute to a decline in relationship satisfaction (Petch & Halford, 2008). The reality of providing 24-hour care to a new born can be a shock for many new parents. Parental fatigue and exhaustion are common and extreme for parents of infants and toddlers with continued sleep disturbances (Petch and Halford, 2008). Interestingly, Elek at al. (2002) found there were no significant differences in self reported fatigue between new mothers and new fathers four months after the birth.

Research suggests that level of fatigue can have a detrimental impact on new parents’ relationship satisfaction (Medina, Lederhos & Lillis; 2009; Meijer and Wittenboer, 2007). During the transition to parenthood, many parents show a decline in positive couple...
relationship during the risk and protective factors

communication (Cowan and Cowan, 2000; Pinquart and Teubert, 2010) and adaptive processes such as relationship ‘maintenance’, emotional responsiveness and spousal support (Kluwer, 2010). This is combined with an increase in conflict (Glade et al., 2005) and change in conflict interaction pattern between partners. Constructive problem solving is most common during the prenatal period, whilst the use of destructive (more harmful) problem solving is highest three months after birth; couples’ problem solving styles tend to stabilise a year after birth (Houts et al., 2008). Glade et al. (2005) refer to a pattern of mutual withdrawal, characteristic of some new parents. Passive avoidance (i.e. becoming quiet and pulling away) also seems to become more common for new parents, compared with childless couples (Crohan, 1996). This change towards a more destructive conflict style may be due to limited time and energy that new parents can allocate to effective conflict resolution. Although passive withdrawal is likely to be less damaging than other destructive conflict behaviours such as verbal hostility and physical aggression, it does not allow conflict issues to be resolved (Kluwer, 2010).

One of the most common conflict issues for new parents is the division of household labour. This relates to another key change associated with becoming a parent: the increase in traditional gender roles (Katz-Wise, Priess & Hyde, 2010; Kluwer, Heesink & van de Vliert, 2002). Social and economic changes have led to a dramatic increase in women’s employment in the last several decades. For many couples, there is now a greater expectation of more equality in the division of labour in childcare and household responsibilities. However, despite best intentions, couples often fall into more traditional gender roles after they become parents. Women often bear the burden of increasing household responsibilities, whilst decreasing their paid work hours (Kluwer et al., 2002; Koivunen, Rothaupt & Wlfgram, 2009). It is women’s dissatisfaction with the division of housework that often leads to perceptions of unfairness and conflict (Moller, Hwang and Wickberg, 2008; Kluwer et al., 2002).

Another reason for a decline in relationship satisfaction is that new parents spend significantly less time with their partners following childbirth (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008). Having to juggle the demands of a new baby, household chores and later establishing a suitable work-life balance, mean there is little time for couples to foster emotional intimacy and share valued activities. This is often combined with a decline in sexual intimacy (Petch & Halford, 2008). A number of new parents (up to 50% women and 20% men) report reduced sexual responsiveness in the first six to twelve months after a baby is born, with one third of couples continuing to report sexual problems three to four years post birth (von Sydow, 1999).

Risk and protective factors

In the past, the focus in the literature has been on the decline in relationship satisfaction, stressing the negative side of the transition to parenthood. It is important to recognise that many couples do not experience a negative change across the transition to parenthood. Some couples show a stabilising of, or even an increase in, relationship satisfaction following the birth of a baby (Clements et al., 2011; Kluwer, 2010; Mitnik et al, 2009). It is interesting to look at the variable changes in relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, to identify which couples fare better or worse and to look at ways to protect those couples more at risk of experiencing problems. The risk and protective factors associated with changes in relationship satisfaction can be divided into the ways couples interact (their adaptive processes) and either

Box 1: Working with Couples in the Transition to Parenthood

- The time around the birth of the first child is an opportune moment for intervention. Involving male partners is often more effective than just focusing on the mother and infant alone. By encouraging fathers to support their partners, more positive outcomes may be experienced by all.
- The majority of existing programmes target either the couple relationship or parenting, with few programmes addressing both areas. It is recommended that more transition to parenthood interventions include partners and that both parenting and couple processes should be included in these programmes.
- Family service providers who work with couples could facilitate discussions regarding expectations for appropriate roles in becoming new parents.
- Practitioners might consider helping couples understand patterns of interpersonal interaction and the ways in which they change over time in a relationship. They could also help couples to foster positive interactions by helping them to develop communications skills, promote constructive conflict behaviours and decrease destructive conflict behaviours. This can be achieved through the use of roleplay and video materials.
- Interventions are more effective if they include at least five sessions and include both an antenatal and postnatal component.
One of the most common conflict issues for new parents is the division of household labour.

The division of household labour is influenced by personal or situational variables. The evidence suggests that the quality of couple interactions before birth influences how couples interact once the baby is born (Houts et al., 2008; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007). Those characterized by destructive conflict and less support and affection during pregnancy are more likely to demonstrate an increase in conflict, more negative interactions and less positive interactions, compared with couples who engage more positively with one another before birth (Houts et al., 2008).

The quality of couple engagement pre-pregnancy also predicts relationship satisfaction among new parents, and especially mothers. Shapiro, Gottman and Carrere (2000) identified a number of features of the couple relationship in the beginning months of marriage that predicted stability versus decline in relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood. The mother’s stable or increased relationship satisfaction was predicted by her partner’s expression of fondness toward her, as well as her partner’s high awareness for her and their couple relationship. Although the ability of both partners to engage positively with one another during pre-pregnancy is linked to relationship satisfaction (Cox et al., 1999) it appears that new mothers may be particularly sensitive to their partners’ behaviours (Shapiro et al., 2000; Kluwer et al., 2002). Koivunen, Rothaupt and Wolfgram (2009) suggest that when men are adept in attending to the relationship, it relieves their female partners of having to do an unequal amount of the emotional work. Research shows that when male partners regulate negative affect and deal with conflict openly and with negotiation, couples tend to maintain high levels of relationship satisfaction when becoming new parents.

Gender is a further variable that has consistently been linked to differences in relationship satisfaction among new parents. The overall decline in relationship satisfaction is stronger for new mothers compared with new fathers (Twenge et al., 2003). Kluwer (2010) suggests that this may be because women are usually faced with more personal and career-related changes resulting from pregnancy, childbirth and childcare. However, the role new fathers play in affecting their partners’ relationship satisfaction is crucial.

Whether or not the pregnancy is planned has also been suggested as a possible protective factor with regards to relationship changes, with planned pregnancies offering some protection to declines in relationship satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2008). Conversely, couples with unplanned pregnancies tend to show larger declines in relationship satisfaction (Cox et al., 1999). However, the evidence on planning status appears to be somewhat mixed, with other studies reporting the opposite, more positive relational outcomes for couples with unplanned pregnancies (Bouchard, Boudreau & Herbert, 2006; Belsky & Rovine,1990). Kline (2010) suggests that that the inconsistencies are likely to be due to differences in how planning was measured. She argues it is each partner’s own perceptions of whether a pregnancy is planned or not which is important, as this influences how that person will manage their own expectations and experiences.

In relation to the division of household labour, research shows that wives with traditional gender role attitudes or those with husbands with traditional attitudes were more likely to avoid conflict in this area compared with those with more egalitarian views (Kluwer et al., 1997). Evidence suggests that protective elements against relationship decline for new parents include a greater congruence in the expectations and reality of changes in domestic labour and where new fathers are involved in household and childcare or voice appreciation and support for their partners’ efforts (Kluwer, 2010). Recent research indicates that the division of household labour is influenced by new parents’ own childhood experiences of gender role modeling (Gupta, 2006).

Various situational factors can also offer protection against, or pose a risk of experiencing declines in relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Some of the main areas that have been explored are social support, infant temperament and Social Economic Status (SES). Social support from family and friends is important and can help couples to cope with the changes associated with having a new baby (Glade et al., 2005). Meanwhile, the temperament of the new baby affects the experience of becoming a parent, which can impact on the couple relationship. Infants who are fussy and unpredictable are likely to present couples with a greater challenge and risk of decline in relationship quality, while those with predictable and calm babies may find it easier to weather the changes that the new baby brings (Kluwer, 2010). Parents of children with disabilities also report greater strain on their relationship (Glenn, 2007).
Evidence with regards to SES is somewhat mixed. Although some studies report that new parents from lower social economic backgrounds are more likely to report problems in the couple relationship and declines in relationship satisfaction (Belsky & Rovine., 1990) others have found the converse (Twenge et al., 2003). It is likely that a complex interplay of factors combine to influence couple outcomes during the transition to parenthood.

**Interventions to support couples**

A theoretical model which helps to explain the involvement of personal, situational and couple interactions has recently been proposed (Kluwer, 2010) and provides a useful framework to develop interventions to support new parents. This model integrates Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) Vulnerability Stress Adaptation model, with the Enduring Dynamics model. (see Figure 1)

The model affirms that the transition to parenthood elicits couple interactions (conflict, communication, marital interaction, spousal support, relationship maintenance) that determine changes in relationship quality and satisfaction. The model considers not only the vulnerabilities but the resources (protective factors) couples bring to the situation (including those that can be enabled through interventions). These affect how couples adapt to becoming parents and subsequently whether they experience a change (positive or negative) in relationship quality. Resources include not only pre-birth personal and situational characteristics (SES, attachment, gender role attitudes, pregnancy planning) but also pre-birth relationship characteristics such as conflict frequency, marital adjustment, communication and support. Post-birth resources and vulnerabilities (child gender, child temperament, division of labour, etc.) are also included in the model as they affect how couples adapt and whether their relationship quality changes across the transition to parenthood.

The constructs within the model, by illustrating why some parents fare worse or better than others, have important implications for practitioners working with new parents. First, it suggests that although relationship declines are common for many new parents, they are not inevitable. Rather than taking a deficit view of this transition, it is useful to adopt a more strengths-based approach, identifying areas that help to protect couples from relationship problems. Indeed, the goal of many existing interventions is to strengthen couple relationships by preparing couples for the difficulties associated with becoming a parent and promoting relationship skills (e.g., communication, conflict management) mutual support, and realistic expectations about parenthood. Although the measured outcomes and findings vary across these programmes, many demonstrate enhanced couple relationship satisfaction following intervention (Pinquart and Teubert, 2010). Where programmes include behavioural skill training, improvements in couple communication are also demonstrated (Shapiro and Gottman, 2005; Halford et al., 2010). Furthermore, a recently conducted meta-analysis of couple-focused interventions with expectant and new parents revealed
that interventions had, on average, small but significant effects on couple communication, psychological wellbeing, and couple adjustment (Pinquart and Teubert, 2010). This suggests that well developed intervention programmes offered to expectant and new parents and which work with both partners can help couples to adapt to relational challenges associated with becoming parents (See Box 1). These principles can form part of structured intervention programmes, as well as more opportunistic support from, for example, frontline social and health workers who have regular contact with families.

Importantly, however, as Kluwer’s transition to parenthood model identifies, the experience of becoming a new parent largely intensifies relationship problems that already exist before and during pregnancy. This highlights the importance of early intervention and helping partners to develop effective ways of interacting before they become parents.

REFERENCES


