



# LOVE notes

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## When One Plus One Equals Three: How a Baby Affects Your Marriage

Becoming parents for the first time is a wonderful and challenging experience. While your baby may be desired, planned and well-loved, your comfortable, familiar lifestyle is going to change to accommodate your baby. Suddenly life may no longer feel so comfortable or familiar. You're likely to see changes everywhere — in your responsibilities, routines and relationships with friends and family. Even your relationship with your spouse may feel completely different — and not always better.

### Marital Satisfaction May Decrease

Research tells us that nearly all couples report a decrease in marital satisfaction for at least a couple of years after a baby arrives on the scene. Why? The culprit is change and how each parent handles their new roles and expectations. On average, men tend to focus on providing for their new family. Their commitment and time shift toward their work. Women, on the other hand, may adopt a more traditional role and focus their attention on parenting and away from work. In fact, for dual-earner couples, the arrival of a child often changes the employment status of one of the parents, typically the mother. The end result of all this shifting and role change is less time and energy for the marriage.

### Signs of Stress

According to the authors of *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows*, new parents often show four signs of related stress: they keep score, their focus

narrows, they resent pressures of the outside world, and they lose their perspective.

### Keeping Score

When new parents are stressed and sleep deprived, they tend to be particularly sensitive to how much they believe they are doing compared to how little the other parent seems to do. Avoid this trap! Focus instead on the positive things that both of you are doing. Retire the scoreboard for good.

### Narrowed Focus

Babies are demanding little creatures and caring for them takes up a great deal of time. It's human nature to cope with stress by focusing on one thing, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else. Couples can sometimes get out of balance, with one partner feeling left out. It's important to talk about these feelings as they come up and work together to find ways to even things out.

### Make the World Go Away

New parents often feel overwhelmed by what used to be normal social ties and activities. With sleep and time at a premium, it is tempting to reduce or completely avoid all social outlets. Remember though, what may seem like a source of pressure can also be a source of support. Cut-offs are usually not healthy. Learn to set realistic boundaries that honor your needs and at the same time, help you keep important relationships alive.

### Lost Perspective

When everything in your life is changing, it's easy for little things to quickly turn into big things. New parents often must adjust their standards, because there simply aren't enough hours to get everything done at the same high level as before the baby arrived. Talk about what's bugging you and work together to find mutual solutions.

### Keep Track of Each Other

Find little times during the day to connect and keep your relationship nourished. A quick shoulder massage, a morning snuggle, a five-minute "How was your day?" will keep things on track. When the schedule allows, go out on a date. Continue to invest in your relationship—it's the best gift you can give your baby. When you need to discuss difficult topics, family expert John Gottman, Ph.D. says...

## try this...

1. Stay calm.
2. Speak non-defensively with your partner.
3. Take the time to express understanding of his or her position.
4. Avoid put-downs and negative assumptions about your partner.

Sources: Jordan, P. L., Stanely, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2001). *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

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