



'BETWEEN A baby who needs you and a partner who may want you, your 'me time' may feel nonexistent.'  
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# Transitioning into parenthood

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

**T**he transition to parenthood is never as easy as one might think it would be. The shattered expectation that the joy from that new little bundle will exceed the woes of sleep deprivation and hormonal fluctuations often has young couples asking themselves "what did we get ourselves into?"

Nonetheless, couples grow into parents, and in spite of the stress, as one learns to accommodate the needs of that tiny baby, who has turned two adults' world upside down, joy peeks through, and taking pleasure in each of the small things a newborn does far exceeds any depressive thoughts.

Having taught infant development for years, the first thing I tell students and new parents is that the birth of our first child was in some ways the worst six weeks of our lives – or at least we thought so at the time. How one baby could make two "professionals" feel totally incompetent within hours was a major shock.

Having just become first-time grandparents, we smile as we revel in the miracle of watching our child parent his new baby, and we think of tips for coping we wish someone had told us back then. If only someone had told us: "At first, all won't be rosy, but given a little time and sleep, you'll not only survive but actually grow to thoroughly enjoy parenting." That would have been more helpful than being led to believe that from the moment of birth, all would be perfect.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Go easy on yourself. Everything is new and unfamiliar, hormones are cascading, and it takes time to get comfortable with parenting. A new baby seems so delicate. While initially it may seem hard to believe, it does get easier. It takes time for you to get to know each other and learn to dance without stepping on each other's toes.

2. Everything takes longer than you anticipate. Somehow it seems that just when you finally finish feeding the baby, it's time to feed her again. If once you were punctual, you may discover that control of your time is no longer in your hands. Most parents remember getting their baby all ready to go out, only to dis-

cover they need a diaper change.

3. Acknowledge that going from a couple to a threesome presents many challenges, at a time when you're physically and psychologically stretched, with little reserve. Between a baby who needs you and a partner who may want you, your "me time" may feel nonexistent. Sharing your exhausted body with both a baby and your partner isn't easy. You are no longer just a partner but a parent, too. Unfortunately, many pregnant couples, having envisioned the birth as the grand finale, are unprepared for the period of adjustment ahead.

4. Recognize that lack of sleep will impact your mood, memory, and desire to be kind to those you care about. At times you may even feel psychotic and unwell. Hopefully, before you find yourself in tears, you can enlist additional help – at least in the beginning. We've all been there! You may feel overly stretched, and an extra set of hands can be incredibly helpful for laundry, meals or baby holding. If you anticipate this before giving birth and arrange to have help, you may find everyone's stress reduced. Some days, getting anything accomplished seems impossible, something unimaginable before.

5. Early on, just when you think the baby has a schedule for eating, sleeping and everything else, things change. Growth spurts in the early weeks can make a schedule irrelevant. With time and luck, the more consistent you are at bathing at certain times, turning lights off in the evening and other things to give the baby a sense of rhythm to the day, the earlier she'll develop a routine, as she begins to see a predictable pattern of what to expect. If, for example, you change the baby after a feeding and a period of wakefulness is followed by bath time, the baby will soon realize when being undressed that she can soon enjoy playtime in the tub.

6. Pick a few trustworthy professionals and friends/family to take advice from and ignore everyone else. What one generation values, another dismisses, so learn to trust yourself. You know your baby and can best read her cues.

7. Recognize that in the early months, you do not spoil your baby by picking her up when she cries. Rather, you teach her that you quickly and lovingly

anticipate her needs, are there for her and respond by soothing, comforting, feeding and so forth. Newborns have immature nervous systems, and will cry. Your responding teaches her that she doesn't have to cry for attention. Babies who are picked up when they cry, cry less when older.

8. Breast-feeding initially may not be as natural or easy as you anticipate, so don't be afraid to seek help. Breast-fed babies typically nurse more frequently than bottle-fed babies, as breast milk is so easily digestible. Don't compare your baby's feeding schedule to your friend's baby. Try and see this time as time for the two of you to get to know each other and for you to relax. While it's tempting to be on your phone while feeding, don't!

9. Remember, you're a team. While it is easy to blame your partner, you're both in this together. Make time to be there for each other, even if only for a few minutes daily. Try, for instance, to sit down in the evening when the baby finally goes to sleep and connect over a cup of tea, even for 20 minutes, before you crash. Find ways to show each other gratitude.

10. Take up any and all offers of help, so that you can preserve your strength.

11. Let your partner (and others) know what he can do to be helpful. Don't assume that he knows what you need at any given time. Be clear and direct.

12. Learn how to steal moments of time. When the baby sleeps, try to at least rest. Practice a few moments of calm breathing to help restore your energy.

Relax; enjoy the baby. If you cannot do this and you feel down or depressed or are concerned about the well-being of either you or your baby, seek professional help. While it is not uncommon for new mothers to experience mild "baby blues" as they make the transition to parenthood, some experience postpartum depression. Help is readily available to enable you to feel better, but you need to take the first step. ■

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