

A Guy's Guide to New Mothers by John Hoffman Originally published in Today's Parent Pregnancy & Birth, Autumn 2003

People always say that babies don't come with a set of instructions. Neither do new mothers. You may think you know your partner very well — and no doubt, you do — but in the first weeks after your baby is born, living with her will be a somewhat different experience.

Some aspects of this will be very exciting and fulfilling and can bring you closer together as a couple. Others may be confusing and frustrating. Here are ten ideas that may help you understand your partner's experience as a new mother:

1. Recovering from childbirth and getting used to being a Mother is a really big deal, physically and emotionally

Perhaps you've heard of pregnancy's three trimesters (three-month periods). The first three months of motherhood are often called the fourth trimester, the time when your partner recovers from the birth, her body gradually becomes "unpregnant" and she immerses herself in learning to keep a totally dependent newborn alive.

Physically, a new mom's uterus has to shrink back to its normal size and shed the lining it developed during pregnancy. That causes abdominal cramps and a vaginal discharge called lochia which is much like a heavy period. Radical changes in hormone levels cause a variety of side effects, from night sweats to painfully swollen breasts. On top of that, she will likely have a sore butt (really sore, if she had an episiotomy) or a very tender Caesarean scar — and she will be exhausted.

Translation? For the next while she's not going to be up to much other than looking after herself and the baby.

Let's connect a few dots. Your partner just went through an intense birth experience. Her hormones are in overdrive. She's only getting a couple of hours of sleep at a stretch. She's entering into an intense attachment with this amazing new little person, and she's not quite sure what she's doing. Is this not a recipe for emotional ups and downs? The highs may be high and the lows may be low, and sudden. New moms sometimes cry for little or no apparent reason, often around the third day (but not only then) after the baby is born. Sometimes we men scurry around trying to figure out what's wrong or how we can make it better. In truth, the best you can hope for is to make it a little better. In other words, just try to be as nice as you can.

2. She can't be looking after you

After that last point, no further explanation should be required. This is a time of your life when you have to step up to the plate and deliver. The hard part is that, at times, you'll need support for yourself, and while your partner may be able to give it sometimes, you can't depend on her the way she has to be able to depend on you. You may need to look to friends and relatives for someone to lean on.

3. She needs your help

“Make sure that the house is clean before she comes back from the hospital, especially the laundry. And take out the garbage.” – Jeff Mehagan, a father of two from Thunder Bay, Ontario

There are tales of tribal superwomen who supposedly squatted by the side of a field for a few minutes to have their babies and then went back to work. Truth or urban legend? Who knows, but the more common tradition in non-industrial cultures is to “mother the mother.” Female relatives and neighbours look after her, feed her, help with the baby and take over domestic chores so she can recover. Few Canadian mothers have this kind of female support network, so they need help from their partners — lots of it — with just about everything: meals, cleaning, laundry, baby care, care of other children.

Key point: This is not as straightforward as it sounds. She doesn't just want your help, she also wants to not always have to tell you what to do. Here's how recent new mom Laurie Foster, of Belleville, Ontario, puts it, “Don't wait for her to ask for help, just jump in. If the baby's crying, see if you can settle her yourself.” Karin Barbaro, of Winnipeg, adds, “Throw clothes in the wash if the hamper is full; dust the furniture if it looks like it needs it.”

True, but it gets trickier still. Even though she'd like you to show initiative, most likely she does have an idea of exactly what she wants you to do and how to do it. At times she may correct you or whisk the baby away so she can do it herself.

Foster remembers: “At first, I would watch him and think, ‘He's doing that all wrong. You don't swaddle her like that; you don't change her diaper like that. It's a really touchy thing. I can understand why fathers might get discouraged.’” The reality is that new mothers can't help taking over sometimes. It's part of the hyper-protectiveness that most of them feel (and are supposed to feel).

The opposing reality is that, try as you might, you probably can't do things exactly her way, nor should you. Fathers need to develop their own way of looking after and being with babies. In a perfect world, mothers would understand this, and most probably do on some level, but right now her priority is to get a grip on her own experience. Therefore, you have quite a balancing act to do. Keep trying, but be prepared to back off (at times, it's the wisest thing to do). Just don't back right out of the picture. “Try to see through the emotions and lack of sleep and let it roll off your shoulders,” says Foster.

4. She feels that the buck stops with her

Mothers and fathers both sense the increased responsibility that comes with a baby, but when it comes to actual baby care mothers usually feel it more strongly. Women grow up with the idea that they will be in charge of a baby someday. So when the going gets tough, they see themselves as the last line of defence. That's pressure, pressure that may make your partner edgy, or seemingly obsessed about her routines, and it may contribute to her feeling that she needs to take over. It should ease up as she becomes accustomed to her new responsibilities and as she gains confidence in your ability and willingness to share those responsibilities.

5. She doesn't have all the answers

"We're making it up as we go along too!" – Jo-Anne Bishop, of London, Ontario

Although mothers tend to pick up baby care skills more quickly than their partners, they have to start out at square one too. Jo-Anne Bishop says, "Fathers sometimes want to know: 'Why is she crying?' 'What is that red mark?' 'She has a sniffle, should we worry?' We don't know! Maternal instinct doesn't cover these kinds of questions."

Therefore, says John Shellenberg of St. Albert, Alberta, whose daughter is now four, "Don't scowl at her when she wants to call the doctor for the third time today. Run and get the cordless for her. Doctors and nurses are used to panicky first-time parents. You're not the only ones."

6. She needs your support for whichever way she is feeding your baby

Knowing that your infant is feeding well is one of the clearest signs that he is doing OK. Therefore, mothers can be emotionally vulnerable about infant feeding.

If your partner is breastfeeding, keep in mind that, although it's "natural," breastfeeding is a skill that mother and baby need to learn together and it doesn't always go smoothly at first. If there are difficulties, some people may question her decision to breastfeed. Protect her from those people. Don't allow them to undermine her confidence. Accept advice only from people who know a lot about breastfeeding (like lactation consultants).

Formula-feeding mothers need practical help with feeding and bottle preparation, but they may also need extra emotional support. Most mothers want to breastfeed and when they can't, for whatever reason, they often feel guilty, inadequate or simply very disappointed. If this is the case, don't say, "It doesn't matter." It may matter a great deal to her. Respect and support her feelings and do what you can to protect her from criticism.

However feeding works out in your family, show your partner that you believe in her and will support her every step of the way.

7. There's nothing magic about six weeks

We've constructed a bit of a social myth that when a baby is six weeks old, things should be getting back to normal. Here's the other side of six weeks. The new mother euphoria has worn off, the help has petered out, the casseroles no longer arrive on your doorstep and the nights of disrupted sleep are starting to add up. Reality sets in. The baby is now awake more of the time but too small to really do much of anything, so often he is at his crankiest. If anything, watch out for six weeks. Your partner might need extra support.

8. When you're at work, she is too

"We may be home all day, but we aren't just sitting on our doughnut pillows doing nothing." – Karen Morton, a Canadian now living in Austin, Texas

We'll let the mothers do the talking here. Lee Ann Campbell, of Naughton, Ontario, says, "Some dads don't really understand what it's like to spend ten hours doing baby stuff usually with the baby hanging off you." What exactly is that like? Parts of it are wonderfully intimate, and, at

times, fun. However, at the end of the day, your partner may sometimes feel like she worked harder than she ever did in her life, without feeling like she accomplished much of anything.

If you're heading back to work while your partner is home with the baby, your job might look to her like the easier one. "Sometimes it feels like our lives have changed completely while their lives really haven't," says Morton.

9. Sex is not uppermost on her mind

No surprise, right? The surprise might be that this can last longer than you expect — beyond the point where she's physically healed. Here's how Jenn Brinkhurst, of Oshawa, Ontario, put it: "Everything can get in the way of sex. Emotions, exhaustion and not really feeling like a woman. I think a lot of men don't really understand these feelings and take it too personally. It's not that we are no longer attracted to our partners. It's that we have changed and need some time to deal with it, physically and emotionally."

What can you do, besides be patient (which is absolutely necessary at times)? There's no simple answer, but here's a good place to start. You have to get to the batter's box before you can get to first base. If she's preoccupied with feeling tired and overwhelmed with how much she has to do, it will be very hard for her to get into the mood. Do what you can to help her get enough rest, and free her from some of the work by doing it yourself. Also reassure her (without pressure, that's the hard part) that you still find her attractive.

10. She's falling in love (with her baby)

There is something quite unique and wonderful about a new mother's single-minded obsession with her baby. It's awesome. Even though it may feel like you've dropped off her radar screen sometimes, this intensity is important. It's a big part of becoming a good mom.

By the way, you can fall in love with your baby too. And apart from being an amazing experience that helps you become a good dad, in some ways it's the key to staying connected with your partner. The baby is the big thing you have in common right now. If you share the discoveries, frustrations, accomplishments and, most importantly, the joys of new parenthood, it can bring you together. She'll be different, but so will you.

One more thing to remember: People's experience of new parenthood, is of course, very individual. That means I could be wrong about any or all of this, at least as far as you and your partner are concerned. So pay attention and get a sense of what your own partner needs. And enjoy your baby, together.

5 Things You Should Never Say to a New Mother:

"Where's my dinner?"

(Say, "I'll just go ahead and get dinner ready, shall I?")

"Why is the baby crying?"

(She might not know any more than you do.)

"Why are you crying?"

(She probably can't explain.)

“But I worked all day.”
(So did she.)

“I think the baby needs changing.”
(Do it yourself.)