

CHILD CARING

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## As holidays approach, new parents may feel excess stress

By Barbara Meltz, Globe Staff | December 11, 2006

Lying in bed with their infant, Raphael, between them, the noise of her husband's snoring a galling soundtrack for her own insomnia, Beth Soltzberg of Arlington had a fantasy, but it wasn't about a long, luxurious night's sleep.

"I would imagine how satisfying it would be to push my husband out of bed and hear the thud he would make as he hit the floor still asleep," she says.

Uh-oh.

A whopping 67 percent of new parents find themselves unhappy with their relationship after the birth of a first child, according to a new study. They are fighting more or for the first time. The emotional closeness between them diminishes, and so does their sex life. The holiday season can make matters even worse.

"At any time of year, there's a strain couples rarely anticipate, and they don't have the time or the energy to fix it," says John M. Gottman, a Seattle psychologist and researcher who studied 172 sets of new parents over three years. At the holidays -- in addition to the stress of new responsibilities, a baby's unpredictable schedule, and sleep deprivation -- new parents also must juggle gift-buying, decoration hanging, and family visiting.

"There's less time than ever for articulating or processing problems," he says. "If hard feelings bubble up, they quickly go underground. Resentment can build up for years."

It was nearly three years before Soltzberg told her husband, Damon Barglow, that she had happily imagined him hitting the floor. By then, they had had professional help and were able to laugh about it. Ditto for the story of potholder.

Married seven years before becoming parents, Soltzberg and Barglow thought they knew each other, especially their shared nonchalance about gifts for "made-up" holidays such as Mother's Day. So Soltzberg was surprised to find herself hinting that she wanted her husband to honor her on her first Mother's Day. Barglow was even more surprised when he didn't and Soltzberg was angry. He went out and brought back a gift: a potholder.

A potholder?

"That's what I thought," she says. She threw it to the floor and called him a number of unflattering names.

The old Beth would have recognized the attempt to poke fun at tradition. The old Damon might have said, "I made a big mistake, I just wanted to make you laugh."

They didn't. "Both of us were too far gone, we weren't connecting with each other at all," says Barglow. The relationship was smoothed over and remained that way after their daughter, Rachael, was born.

In his study, Gottman labels couples as disasters or masters. Disasters are the 67 percent who experience marital dissatisfaction up to three years after the baby. Masters are stressed out, too, he says, but somehow their relationship stays strong.

Parsing the difference between these couples, Gottman and his wife, psychologist Julie Schwartz Gottman, wrote a book, "And Baby Makes Three," due out next month, and developed a workshop program for couples, "Bringing Baby Home." Their goal is to nip disasters in the bud.

Here's a holiday disaster in the making, says social worker Carolyn Pirak, director of the "Bringing Baby Home" program ([bringingbabyhomeonline.org](http://bringingbabyhomeonline.org)), which includes certification training for workshop leaders: The mom invites her parents for Christmas morning; she doesn't want to disrupt the baby's routine by taking him out. The dad has a fantasy about having their new family's first Christmas morning alone. He lashes out: "How could you invite your parents without asking me?!" The mom replies: "But we can't take the baby out!" His retort: "Why are you always so selfish, thinking about your family instead of me?"

It's bad enough that the parents are now angry and tuning the other out. What makes it worse, says Gottman, is that raised voices affect the baby. "Studies show that heightened parental conflict can lead to developmental delays in a child, including language delays," he says.

In "Bringing Baby Home" workshops, which in Massachusetts are run by leaders in Concord, Upton, and Woods Hole, couples learn to create points of connection and diminish points of conflict, says Pirak. "Instead of criticism and blame, there is identification of the problem. Instead of defensiveness and accusations, there is acceptance and repair:

Dad: "I understand your parents are coming Christmas morning."

Mom: "I'm so excited!"

Dad: "I've always had this fantasy that once we had kids, Christmas morning would be a time just for us."

Mom: "Oh honey, you never told me that."

Dad: "Yeah. I wouldn't mind if they came later in the morning. . . ."

Mom: "Let me ask."

Another issue that tends to surface at the holidays is a changed relationship between new parents and their extended family, says social worker Peggy H. Kaufman, director of the Center for Early Relationship Support at Jewish Family & Children's Service in Waltham.

"A new mom may be hungering for more from her mother. She may resent that her mom is preoccupied with Christmas cookies instead of paying attention to her," she says. Her advice to extended families is to give new parents meals for the freezer, an offer to baby-sit when they are ready, or a gift certificate for a night out.

While other researchers have looked at the emotional difficulties couples encounter as they become parents, the Gottmans are the first to also look at sex.

"One of the reasons disasters become disasters is because couples don't have physical intimacy to turn to as a source of repair," Gottman says. "The couples who do well in their relationship have a large sexual menu and they're creative." His study shows that, three or four months after a baby's birth, men want sex three to four times a week, woman once a week. But both partners are more likely to feel satisfied by what he calls "gourmet sex" -- a range of intimate activities.

While Christmas is a time for family, New Year's is considered a time for each other. "If Christmas hasn't gone the way you wanted it to, you may not be in the mood for a romantic New Year's," Gottman says. "That's gonna be just one more disappointment, if you don't talk about it." ■

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