

I'M FINDING IT HARD TO BOND WITH MY BABY

by

'The Baby Colic Coach' Venetia Moore

This article is about how you, the dad, could be perceiving this whole new experience of fatherhood. It's not uncommon for men to find it difficult to adjust to the arrival of a baby and the radical changes this brings, especially when you're a first time parent. Other than some good books and magazines, there's little that can really prepare us for parenting; no diploma or degree could possibly match up to the real experience itself! It seems it's all about jumping in with both feet, being real with ourselves and others, being open to learning on the job, and just doing the best we can.

There could be many reasons for you experiencing difficulties. It's good to remind yourself that you're not the only dad that's walked that particular path and that mums face challenges too! In this article I will be looking at some possible thoughts and feelings that could be preventing you from fully bonding and offering some ideas and suggestions to consider putting into action.

Are you:

- Anxious that you're not bonding with your baby as well as your partner seems to be doing
- Angry about being ignored, as your partner is spending a lot of time with the baby
- Frustrated because you're not able to do all the things you used to do before you had the baby
- Exhausted and stressed a lot of the time
- Despairing and confused – you just didn't expect to feel this way about parenting
- Irritated and unsure about what you're doing most of the time
- Low and possibly depressed?

LIFESTYLE AND RELATIONSHIP CHANGES

Maybe the reality of being a parent didn't seem that real until the moment actually arrived, and arrive it did in a rather dramatic and profound fashion! Perhaps the birth didn't go according to the plan or maybe there were complications, all of which could be the cause of much stress. Or maybe you saw this miracle unfolding in front of your eyes, and are now

trying to be actively supportive while actually feeling quite daunted and even feeling a little superfluous. Perhaps you didn't anticipate the fact that your freedom to come and go would be quite so curtailed, and that you'd be so exhausted all the time. Maybe you're finding it a strain to juggle your work with home life on top of endless broken nights. Possibly, you're experiencing the weight of the financial and emotional responsibilities of parenting and even feeling a little bit overwhelmed by it all.

At the start, focus and attention is naturally to be more centred on mum and baby and this could result in your feeling that your needs are being overlooked and are unimportant. At these times you may be wanting more physical intimacy as you think this would help you to be more involved, loved and needed – but your partner is obviously not keen! This could be due to many reasons; quite possibly, she is just too tired! There could be physical and hormonal reasons for this. Be aware that your feelings could be heightened at this moment and there could be some misunderstandings and possibly over-reactions to the apparent lack of interest. Try not to assume that she doesn't care about you, or that you're not important to her any more; these thoughts might be totally untrue and it's quite likely that your partner's needs are just different from yours at this time. Acknowledging your own thoughts, taking responsibility for them and doing something about them will help you to accept and enjoy your baby more.

THE DADDY BLUES

Low thoughts and feelings can be tiring and could be preventing you from being able to relax and enjoy bonding with your baby.

We've all heard of post-natal depression and the baby blues with reference to mothers. Is there such thing for fathers? According to research, up to 10% of new fathers could experience a degree of baby blues or even clinical depression. While most of the focus has been on the mums, little consideration has been given to you, the dads, who could be also having similar experiences. Odd as it may sound, you could feel simultaneously empowered and disempowered: empowered because you have this new love, and disempowered because you're feeling vulnerable about your being responsible for this new being.

Canadian researcher Anne Storey found that new fathers' testosterone levels drop radically, by up to one third, after childbirth. Testosterone affects energy and mood, so this can result in feeling a little down. These lowered hormone levels, however, can also be beneficial, increasing your tolerance and helping you to feel calmer.

Other stresses and anxieties could also contribute to the dampening of your feelings. Perhaps you're feeling low because of the number of changes you've had to make to your lifestyle and relationship, or may be you're feeling the weight of responsibility that comes with being the provider and supporter. If you do, you're not alone with these thoughts; it's natural to have them, most dads will be experiencing the same thoughts to a lesser or greater degree,

Some low feelings will naturally move on in time but, it's important to recognise when they're not and to do something constructive about them.

STRESSES AND ANXIETIES

Stresses and anxieties could be contributing to the dampening of your feelings towards your baby and interfering with the bonding process. Perhaps your partner or your baby experienced some birthing complications and you're still dealing with the effects of the trauma. Or maybe you're experiencing anxiety due to complications with your baby's health and well-being. If your baby is suffering with colic it would make it harder to have peaceful, bonding times together. Or you could also be feeling anxious and possibly disorientated by the number of changes you've had to make to your lifestyle. If you're in a position where you're supporting a partner who is experiencing post-natal-depression, this in it's self could be stressful and your normal pressures and concerns could seem far more overwhelming.

What ever the reason, again you're not alone with having these thoughts. You can't really appreciate what it's like to have a baby to care for until it happens, and there's bound to be a transitional time where all sorts of concerns arise and challenges need to be overcome. It's important to remember that they will resolve in time, and by acknowledging them, opening up and sharing them could help to resolve them sooner .

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Firstly it's good to be honest with yourself and acknowledge your current thoughts. You don't have to feel guilty or ashamed about them – they are not uncommon. But, even though you wouldn't wish them to, they could be negatively affecting your behaviour towards your baby and your partner, so it's a good idea to take responsibility for them and address them. It's important to remember that they will resolve in time, and things will change. Another dad wanted me to pass on his best advice to other fathers going through a rough patch: "Don't forget that it won't last forever. You will get through it."

So how can you get through the rough patches quicker and with less stress and anxiety?

Here are some suggestions:

- **BE HONEST** Try not to hide away and bury your thoughts and feelings as this could be disempowering and destructive. Left unaddressed, they may damage your relationship and your experience of fatherhood.
- **TALK THINGS OVER WITH YOUR PARTNER** Be real, talk to your partner; it's more than likely that she is also feeling some anxieties and concerns about parenting, and will be relieved to be able to talk things over positively with you. A good partnership allows

you both to be honest and real with each other in expressing how you each view the problem or situation: no shame or blame – just good communication. While it's possible you're experiencing things similarly, it's also possible that you could have completely different perspectives. Both points of view need to be respected and acknowledged as being different but equally important. By putting your minds together the two of you can work together to bring about improvements a lot faster.

- **BE OPEN TO SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS** If you're reluctant to share these thoughts with your partner, perhaps not wishing to burden her, or for some other good reason, then try writing your feelings down or sharing your thoughts with a trusted friend, family member, GP or health professional. It can be very helpful to talk with someone who is not so closely involved and is able to see things from a different perspective. This gives you a way to express them and also to look at them more clearly and objectively. It's important that your feelings are acknowledged and heard in some way. Bottling up feelings and concerns can lead to prolonged blues and even possibly clinical depression. Airing your concerns and dealing with the root causes of being down can enable you to see things differently and shift your mood.
- **CUDDLES!** Simple but wonderful, just cuddling your baby will help to reassure both you that you matter to each other. Cuddling is a natural way to give and receive affection. It also encourages the release of the 'feel-good' hormone oxytocin in both of you, which helps with the bonding process.
- **PLAYTIME** Have some fun together, just enjoying each other's company. Sit and talk to your baby – they will love to hear your voice. Try some baby yoga exercises, easy movements that you can combine with some little swings and lifts. Take your baby out for a walk in a baby carrier or buggy.
- **QUIET TIME TOGETHER** Sit with your baby for a while. Try some baby massage it could help to bring you closer together in a relaxed and loving way; you'd be amazed at how wonderful you could feel afterwards.
- **JUMP IN** Get involved in the practicalities of baby care. Share some of the tasks, such as nappy changing, feeding, bathing and dressing your baby. This would greatly help your partner, giving her some 'baby-free' time out, as well as deepening your relationship with your baby.
- **SOCIAL TIME** Take your baby out and meet up with other dads for some time out together.
- **COUPLE CARE** Look after each other – good parenting is team work! This is a time for understanding and patience. There are many ways to give and receive love and affection; its important for you both to plan some time together so that you can look after

your relationship with each other. While you'll naturally have different needs at this time, it's likely that you'd both benefit from having some time together where possible. Why not plan a date, a walk, a trip out – anything that feels right and can be managed child-free. Remind each other in little ways just how important you're to one another. Being kind and respectful to each other will help to keep a flow of love and good feeling between you. This strengthening of your bond together can greatly help you in dealing with those inevitable challenges along the parenting journey.

Take heart. However challenging or distressing this time is, it will pass! It's the hardest times that can teach us the most valuable lessons. All your kind and loving efforts to change the situation will be rewarded, and once you've bonded and the love flows freely between you both, that special bond will endeavour to change and enrich your life for ever .

ABOUT VENETIA MOORE

A COMPLEMENTARY HEALTH & WELL-BEING PRACTITIONER

Venetia lives in the South West of England where she has worked as a complementary health and well-being practitioner and teacher for over 23 years. She has been part of a complementary health centre in Minehead, set up by a group of very forward thinking doctors in 1995. She also runs a variety of classes for parents, babies, and adults.

THE BABY COLIC COACH AND AUTHOR OF *SURVIVING BABY COLIC*

As a parent of two children who suffered with colic, she has gathered both personal and professional experience and understanding of the complex challenges parents face at this time. Her new book, *Surviving Baby Colic* is a practical, holistic guide providing support, information, illustrations, natural care ideas and suggestions on how to help your baby and how to look after yourself well during this demanding time.

She also offers an online service to help parents to identify colic and to give them ways to help and support themselves and their babies at this time.

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