

WHAT HAPPENED TO US?

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When a couple becomes a family, the dynamics in the relationship change forever. That does not mean that the relationship becomes worse, but it does mean that the focus will go from just the couple onto what it means to be part of a family.

In my family of origin, things were largely unpredictable and life was quite stressful. To escape the conflict, I often spent weekends during my early teenage years at my friend Linda's house. We were in the same class at school, and what I envied about her family life was the veneer of happiness and calmness. During all the years that I spent weekends there, I never heard a cross word being exchanged. Her mother used to tell her four daughters that they should never go to bed without making friends with each other. This was my idea of the "perfect" family.

Some years later, when Linda and I had both been married for about two years, I went to visit her. To my surprise and dismay, she looked distressed and confused. When we discussed what was wrong, she told me that she had been fighting with her husband and did not think this was normal. She also had no idea about how to resolve the conflict she was finding herself in. Linda related that she had recently found out that instead of the "ideal" family life she thought she had had as a child, that her parents did indeed fight, they just did not do it in front of the children. This news had left Linda feeling betrayed and angry. Betrayed that she had always believed her parents did not fight and angry as she was now in a situation with her own husband that she had no idea how to handle.

Linda's parents, in their efforts to "protect" their children from conflict, had left Linda and her siblings with no conflict resolution skills at all. Linda and I had both grown up in the 1950's and 60's when the norm was that things were not discussed "in front of the children". Even in my own household, where there was open conflict, I mostly did not know what the conflict was about, just that there was upset and tension in the household.

It has been my experience that like what was going on with parents during my childhood with their adult disputes, that there continues to be a conspiracy of silence regarding what changes in relationships once children are born.

We are bombarded with images of "perfect" babies and contented happy mothers and fathers in the media. But what happens if you have an unsettled baby who keeps you up at night? How do you cope if your husband feels neglected because there is this new person in the household and all your energies are being spent looking after a child who does not fit into a routine? What do you do if your parents live too far away from you to be of any practical support or you do not have a good support network around you? What do you do if your wife is not interested in sex and it is twelve months or longer after your baby was born? Is this normal?

These questions and many more are largely undiscussed and unanswered in the modern "have to have everything" fast world we live in.

1. Support and Roles in the Family

Support

One of the major sources of discontent in relationships is when one or both of the partners do not feel supported by the other or by their extended network of family/friends/colleagues. Bringing a child into the equation of a relationship brings different dynamics to the relationship. It would be useful to explore the issue of support to perhaps prevent conflict arising from misunderstandings regarding who is giving whom support. Some useful questions to ask yourselves would include –

- What does the word support mean to you?
- In your family of origin how did your mother support your father?
- How did your father support your mother?
- In your family of origin was it ok for you or your siblings to ask for support?
- Do you have a belief that it is ok to ask for support?
- How difficult is it for you to ask for support?
- What do you think gets in your way of asking for support?
- What is your family's attitude to asking for help outside the family?
- If you are pregnant, who do you want to support you during labour?
- Have you discussed this with this person/people?
- Do you have to consider your extended family? Is this what you want? If not, what would be the best way to tackle this issue?

“Women are reluctant to ask for what they need, since they don't feel entitled to have their needs met and are afraid of appearing selfish. Men, on the other hand, are reluctant to acknowledge any emotional needs for fear of feeling humiliated or rejected.” (Stiver, I. “The Meanings of Dependency in Female-Male Relationships” cited in Walters M., Carter. B., Papp P. & Silverstein O. **“The Invisible Web”** The Guilford Press 1988 p204)

“Men have never learned to ask for what they want because within the traditional structure of the family, they have come to expect that a woman will take care of their physical and emotional needs...Even many “liberated men have difficulty giving up this notion entirely. However, when this caretaking is interrupted by events such as the arrival of a child or a wife going back to school or work, many men experience intense jealousy and feelings of abandonment. Since these men hate that part of themselves that is dependent, they (may) try to disown it and react either by withdrawing or by becoming aggressively demanding.” (Walters et al p205)

Roles and Tasks – Who Does What

Questions

- What sorts of expectations do you have regarding the role of your partner in your new family? Where do these expectations come from?
- What are your partner's expectations of your role in your new family?
- Are these roles realistic in your current situation?
- Have you discussed them with each other before?

- What will happen if your partner if you feel let down by your partner? How will you handle it? Can you talk openly with your partner regarding your feelings of being let down?

Homework

1. Create a list of people in your life who may be able to offer you support. Keep a phone list handy
2. Ask one person this week for help, no matter how small the help is.
3. Discuss with your partner the role expectations you have of each other.

?family therapy view of roles in the family

2. Post Natal Depression in Women and in Men

- What is Post Natal Depression?
- Facts and figures on PND
- What is depression?
- Signs and symptoms of depression
- Do men have PND?

Questions

- Do you know anyone with depression or who has had depression?
- Does anyone in your family suffer from depression?
- What is it like for that person?
- What is it like living with someone who is depressed?

3. Stress Management

Discussion –

- What is stress? .
- How do you know when you are stressed?
- What did your parents do when they were stressed?
- What causes stress?
- How does your body feel when you are stressed?
- How do you behave when you are stressed?
- What do you do to manage your stress?

Individually, write down what you think causes you the most stress in your life. How do you manage your stress?

Stress Management/relaxation – discuss techniques and suitability to employing a stress management technique into your life.

Homework

1. Notice when you are stressed.
2. Talk to your partner about the stresses in your relationship. What would help reduce the stress?
3. Do one thing to manage your stress every day, even if it only takes 15 minutes.

4. Communication Skills

- What happens at your house when you try and talk and are not listened to?
- Why?
- How do you communicate to your partner when you are happy?
- Does this change when you are annoyed with your partner? In what way?
- What effect does this have on your partner? Ask your partner how you being annoyed affects him/her.
- Body language in communication
- What are the ways we communicate non verbally?
- Barriers to good listening (escalation; invalidation; negative interpretations; withdrawal; avoidance.
- How do you respond when you feel unheard?

5. Conflict Resolution

- What is the difference between assertiveness; non assertion and aggression?
- When you are assertive how do you behave?
- In what circumstances do you not behave assertively?
- What feedback do you get from your partner about your communication style?
- When was the last time you were assertive and what happened?
- When was the last time you were aggressive (with someone you know) and what happened?
- In what ways can you start being assertive in your relationship?

6. Grief and loss when change happens

- Have you ever lost anything or anyone important in your life?
- What was it like?
- What were your feeling about losing this person/thing?
- How did you handle your feelings – did you talk to someone about your feelings; did you get angry; did you feel anxious and confused; did you feel things you didn't understand; were you embarrassed/ashamed of how you were feeling?
- Have you ever had a significant relationship breakup?
- What was it like?

For some men, having a first child is like losing a relationship in that you go from being a couple to watching your wife/partner having an intimate relationship with your child. The feelings can be overwhelming, as you might feel confused and ashamed of being jealous of your own baby and feel you can't talk to anyone about it. Do you think that if you ever felt like this you could talk to someone about it?

(tie in with PND in men)

“When a woman becomes a mother, her relationships, her professional identity and her sense of self, will never be the same again. The fact is, the presence of children does not simply add to the lives of their parents, it transforms those lives completely. The precise nature of this transformation remains one of the best kept secrets of contemporary adult life, shrouded in a conspiracy of silence.” **The Mask of Motherhood: How Mothering Changes Everything and Why we Pretend It Doesn't** Maushart, S. Vintage (1997)

7. Friendship and Sex after children

When a couple becomes a family, the dynamics in the relationship change forever. This was well put by a former client, Sarah 29 years old. Sarah has been married for six years to Tom and has a one year old daughter. She told me “The transition from being wife/partner to mother to back to wife is very hard to make. It is especially difficult to make the transition back to being a sexual partner after becoming a mother. You spend all day being a mum and taking care of your baby's needs, only to have your husband come home at the end of the day (when you are most tired) and want his needs met too. He wants the old (more attentive) wife back, that caters to all his needs. Sometimes it just pisses me off that he isn't more understanding. When do my needs get met? We have more fights about sex than anything else. Sometimes I just say “yeah whatever” just so he will get off my back – it makes me feel cheap sometimes and then I feel resentful towards him.”

We are learn very early in our family and society that women behave in certain ways and men behave in other certain ways. Some authors believe that these imposed attitudes and expectations get in the way of couples having intimate and close relationships. “Although both men and women genuinely desire intimacy with one another and spend much of their lives seeking it, they are socialized in ways that make that intimacy difficult to achieve. Women are raised with the expectation that their main goal in life is to take care of others...the price they pay is that they are left to rely on others, particularly their husbands, for their sense of power, status and authority outside the home...If they are also financially dependent on their husbands, they do not develop the skills needed to deal with the outside world...This inequitable recognition of male-female contributions in the larger society is a vital component of the marital relationship...” (Walters et al p203).

These authors go on to describe “men's sense of self is based primarily on achievement rather than personal relationships, thus giving to others is not part of their self-image as it is for women...their self-image is connected to doing...Success in the working world often requires repressing personal feelings, learning to master passion or weakness and developing controlled, guarded and calculated

behaviour...although men defend themselves against the threat posed by love and intimacy, their need for it does not disappear; and they ask from women what they are afraid of giving and receiving.” (Walters et al p204)

- What is a friend?
- Can a partner be a friend?
- What do you like about your partner as your friend?
- How do you show your partner that they are your friend?
- What is one thing that would improve your friendship?
- What is normal sex following the birth of a baby?
- What are some of the myths about sex after the birth of a baby?
- What are your expectations about sex following the birth of your baby?
- If you are a man – what do women want/expect regarding sex after the birth of your baby? What does your partner expect/want?
- If you are a woman – what do men want/expect regarding sex after the birth of your baby? What does your partner expect/want?
- Did your parents discuss sex with you when you were growing up?
- If they did, was it a satisfying and informative discussion for you?
- If they didn't where did you learn about sex?
- Do you discuss your sexual preferences with your partner?
- Finish this sentence – “I feel loved and cared for by my partner when.....” Discuss your answer with your partner

8. What happens if I was sexually abused as a child?

In my experience working for ten years as a Counselling Psychologist, the majority of women I see in my practise have been sexually abused. They come with a range of presenting issues, such as depression, relationship issues, addictive behaviours (such as gambling problems) amongst other things. It is usually only when they begin to trust me that they will tell me that they were sexually abused as children. Sometimes this happens after a few consultations, at other times it can take up to six months, or even longer.

It is very common for women to think that their particular sexual abuse was not serious “it only happened once” or “it was only a game he was playing with me – he didn't really know it was abuse”. However, if what happened to you as a young person is still being played over in your mind and is interfering with your everyday life , it may mean that it is still a problem for you. Sexual abuse can happen to both boys or girls (statistics). The effect of the abuse can be as varying as the abuse itself. For some people, they know that the abuse happened but they have been able to put it “to the back of my mind” and not let it interfere with their daily lives. However, for others, it does not go away and the effects can be experienced in a variety of ways that can affect their daily lives.

“Debbie” a 39 year old mother of three told me “It was after the birth of my second child. Suddenly I found myself standing at the end of the - Pier and wanting to jump off. That was when I knew I needed help.” Debbie reported that she had been systematically sexually abused by a close friend of her father's from the time when

she was eight years old until she was about eleven years old. She did not feel she could confide in her parents because “he was such a close friend of my father’s that I thought my parents must know what was going on. If they knew and weren’t doing anything to stop it, it must be alright.” Debbie described that for years she would have flashbacks and nightmares of the abuse or flashes from her past. They had been pushed to the back of her mind for so long that she had forgotten what they meant. However, the flashbacks always left her feel confused and frightened. It was only after the birth of her second child that these images started to come back in such a frightening way that Debbie knew she needed to do something about it.

The timing of the recollections was no coincidence. Debbie’s older son was eight years old, the same age as Debbie had been when the abuse started. When she first came to see me, Debbie was suffering from sleep disturbances, nightmares and flashbacks of the abuse, loss of appetite, mood disorder, high levels of stress and sudden unexplained outbursts of anger. She was also terrified to leave her children in the care of anyone else at all because “something might happen to them”. She also related that (the abuse had) always interfered with “my ability to have a normal sexual relationship”. There were certain sexual acts that “make me feel nauseous and frightened”. What disturbed Debbie the most was that her husband could not understand why “after all these years” what happened to her as a child was still bothering her.

“Alice” a former client, came to me suffering from depression. She was 28 years old and had a one year old daughter. She was quite depressed, and had been referred by her local G.P. Alice related that as an eleven year old, she had been inappropriately touched by a stranger. Alice was sleeping over at a school friend’s house when the abuse took place. Her girlfriend’s parents were having a party, and Alice and her girlfriend were lying under blankets in the lounge-room when this man came over and put his hand down Alice’s pyjama pants. Alice was very frightened but felt unable to react. The man went into another room and she then started to cry. Her girlfriend told her to tell her mother. Her girlfriend’s mother told her to “not be so stupid” and to go back to sleep. She would not let Alice telephone her own mother so that she could go home. Alice told me that the whole night, she was afraid to go to sleep and watched the man as he sat in the kitchen at the bench, drinking beer. The next day Alice went home and told her parents. They believed her story, and the matter was taken to the Police and the man was subsequently charged and jailed.

However, Alice’s further trauma began when she went back to school. Her girlfriend (feeling she needed to be loyal to her own mother) said she did not believe Alice and told all the girls in their class that Alice was a liar.

Alice felt ostracized, frightened and confused. She eventually left the State School and had to start mid-year at another local school. This experience left her unable to trust or make new friends, feel depressed and somehow believing that the whole experience had been her fault. In her early adult years, she began to question the reality of her experience, as her “friends” had not believed her. Maybe the whole thing had been a dream or a silly mistake. However, she was still unable to stop the feelings of depression and the flashbacks.

After the birth of her own baby girl these particular memories started interfering with Alice's life in such a profound way that she needed psychological help. Like Debbie, Alice also felt uncomfortable having sex with her husband and like Debbie's husband, he too found her symptoms confusing and difficult to live with.

Alice's husband John came with Alice to see me on one occasion. He wanted to understand what was happening to his wife, as he was finding her depressed moods and angry outbursts difficult to understand or live with. In our sessions previously, Alice had complained that John rarely helped her, especially with their daughter. We talked about this in the joint session and John was able to tell his side of the story. He stated that whenever he went to do something with their daughter, like bath her or feed her, that Alice complained he was doing it "wrong". He said that he eventually lost confidence in his abilities as a parent and stopped trying. He was also hurt and angry that Alice "says she wants help but won't let me be a father." When we talked about this issue, Alice realized that she was so frightened of something happening to their daughter, that she could not relinquish control over the baby's wellbeing, even to her husband.

This issue of trust seems to be even more pronounced when the perpetrator of the abuse is known to the victim, such as a family member or trusted friend of the family. Many women tell me that after their own experience of being abused, they even find it difficult to completely trust their own husbands with their children. "If my father (brother/cousin/uncle/grandfather) could abuse me, maybe my husband is capable of it too." Mistrusting their husbands can leave these women feeling guilty and confused. It then can lead to arguments because they feel unable to talk to their partner about how they are feeling, but at the same time, unable to fully let go of their doubts.

In addition both men and women who have been sexually abused as a child can be terrified that they would end of being a child abuser themselves. My client Linda was so frightened of this that she felt uncomfortable even changing her baby's nappy, in case she touched her inappropriately. This one experience with a stranger had damaged her confidence in her own mothering instincts. So she was caught between wanting John's help because she felt confused about her own abilities but terrified to let John or anyone else help with the baby in case they abused her. By the time Alice had come to see me, she was exhausted, confused, depressed and angry.

From my experience working with many, many women who were sexually abused as children, Debbie and Alice's experiences are unfortunately common. It is really important that if you think you were sexually abused as a child, and the memories are interfering with your daily life, that you seek professional support.

Put in facts and figures on sexual abuse

9. Motherhood and Fatherhood

"Being a parent and raising reasonably happy, well adjusted children is far from a science. When experienced parents talk about bringing up their children, they describe it as demanding, creative, anxiety provoking and riddled with uncertainty,

but also the most fulfilling and personally valuable experience in their life.” (Holmes Dr S.)

- What is a good parent? What was expected of your mother by your father in the parenting role in your family of origin?
- What was expected of your father by your mother in the parenting role in your family of origin?
- What do you expect of yourself as a mother/father?
- What do you expect of your partner as a mother/father?
- In your family of origin, who was considered the **real** parent? How has influenced your thinking about parenthood?
- Have you discussed this with your partner?
- What value does your family of origin put on parenthood?
- What values does your culture put on motherhood/fatherhood?
- What value do you think your society places on these roles?
- Talk to someone you know who is a mother/father about these issues. See if you are surprised by what you hear. Discuss these issues with your partner.
- What role did your mother play in your life?
- What role did your father play in your life?
- What expectations does your partner have of you in your role as parent?
- What expectations do your parents have of you in your role as parent?
- How do you think your friends/colleagues will treat you once you become a parent?
- In your family of origin, who did the disciplining? What do you think of the way you were disciplined?
- Who is going to do the disciplining in your family and how will this be done? Discuss this with your partner. Do not assume that your partner has the same ideas about parenting that you do.
- Besides your partner, who else is going to be allowed to discipline your child? (eg grandparents). Do you know how your partner’s parents look on discipline? What will you do if they want to discipline your child in a way that you don’t approve of? How will this affect your relationship with your partner if they allow their parents to discipline the child in a way you do not approve of?

According to Dr Holmes (ibid) “The basic principles of good parenting are –

1. Age appropriate rules
2. Clear communication
3. Logical consequences
4. Being consistent
5. Good problem solving and conflict resolving skills
6. Good supervision
7. Positive involvement with the child
8. Being tuned in and responsive while demanding achievable standards.”

9.Coping Skills

- Now that you can identify when you feel stressed and you are doing something to help yourself relax, how will you know when you are not coping with your new role as a parent?
- Do you know other people with a young family? What do they do when they feel they aren't coping?
- Who is someone you know that does seem to cope with new situations?
- How do they do it? Can you talk to them or watch them to see what their strategies are?
- How do you cope when you are under a lot of pressure? Can you organize to take some regular time out when you have your baby, both for yourself and for you and your partner together? This may seem impossible to organize, but even a walk around the block when your partner is home to look after the baby, will feel like you are doing something for yourself. If you end up feeling that all you do is give to others, you run the risk of building up resentful feelings towards your partner. It is your responsibility to make sure that you take some time out, even for 20 minutes at a time to help avoid this happening.
- Who are the people you can identify now that you can go to for help if things are getting stressful and you are feeling overwhelmed?
- What are the expectations you feel are placed on you by others to cope all the time? Are these expectations realistic? If they are not realistic, can you talk to these people before you have your baby about your concerns?
- Who can you call on for help in an emergency? Make a list and may be talk to these people.
- How do you prioritise things that need to be done?
- What do you plan to do in the first few months when the baby is born and the baby is sleeping?
- Do you need help with the housework etc. Who can help you?

? Section on going back to work/money – how do these issues impact on the relationship?

?Section on cultural/religious differences.

Career first/children later?

As an older mother, issues of losing independence and control – a high achiever who puts themselves last because work is first – has never had to go without sleep for the night and then go to work the next day – has always had good communication skills; always been in control and had a strong sense of competency. So what happens when you have a baby and lose your sense of competency when the baby doesn't fit in with your set of rules or your timetable? You may feel unable to cope with the realities of having a child who doesn't know how competent you were as a career person and does not appreciate your need to be in control. etc

