

Mothers' parenting stress impacts both parents' sexual satisfaction

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First-time parents are only somewhat satisfied with their sex lives according to Penn State health researchers who checked in with parents regularly after their baby was born. And one factor that appears to be reducing their sexual satisfaction is mothers' stress as a new parent.

"The transition to parenthood has gained importance recently," said Chelom E. Leavitt, doctoral student, [human development](#) and family studies. "We know that sexual satisfaction is an important element in relationships, but as far as we know, it hasn't been studied at this transition before. We wanted to know how parenting stress affects sexual satisfaction."

Leavitt and colleagues looked at data from 169 expectant heterosexual couples who had participated in the Family Foundations prevention program. The couples were asked about the parenting stress they were experiencing six months after that baby was born. Twelve months after the baby was born, parents reported on their overall sexual satisfaction.

"Interestingly, we found that men's parenting stress had no impact on either men's or women's sexual satisfaction," said Leavitt.

But the amount of parenting stress women felt affected the sexual satisfaction of both partners. The researchers report their results in the journal *Sex Roles*.

Leavitt pointed out that women generally bear the larger responsibility in

caring for the new baby, and social pressures may lead women to strive to be the "perfect mother."

"When new moms feel fatigued by the added responsibilities of parenting, they may feel less sexual," said Leavitt. "The sexual relationship is interdependent, so when a mom feels greater stress due to parenting, not only is her sexual satisfaction diminished, the dad's sexual satisfaction is also affected."

At the six-month follow-up, each parent was asked to rate statements pertaining to the stress of becoming a parent on a scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. The statements included "I find myself giving up more of my life to meet my child's needs than I ever expected" and "My child smiles at me much less than I expected."

A year after becoming parents, the mothers and fathers completed the statement, "Regarding your sex life with your partner, would you say that you are overall...", with a scale ranging from 1, not at all satisfied, to 9, very satisfied.

Leavitt and colleagues found that mothers reported greater sexual satisfaction at 12 months than fathers did, with 69 percent of the women reporting they were somewhat to very satisfied with their sex lives—a 6 or above on the scale—and 55 percent of men reporting being somewhat to very satisfied.

"This was a good spring board for people to understand how parenting stress affects [sexual satisfaction](#)," said Leavitt.

This research may assist parents, therapists and others to help new mothers and fathers better understand the strains of transition to parenthood. Leavitt pointed out that future research will need to include more diverse populations, including different ethnicities, age groups,

sexual orientations and socioeconomic categories.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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