

HOW KNOWLEDGEABLE ARE COUPLES REGARDING CHANGES IN THEIR SEXUALITY IN THE PERINATAL PERIOD?

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INTRODUCTION

New parents undergo a series of complex physiological and psychological changes, which tend to affect the marital relationship.

Little attention has been paid to couples' sexuality, sensuality, and intimacy.

OBJECTIVE

Explore mothers' and fathers' experiences of sexuality, sensuality, and intimacy from pregnancy to the postpartum period.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative descriptive study, with thematic analysis of individual interviews; 31 couples parents of children less than 14 months.

RESULTS

SEXUALITY IN THE PRENATAL PERIOD

Adapting to the “changing body” of the mother-to-be

Changes in couples' sexuality can be attributed to physiological changes experienced by the mother-to-be and to discomforts related to pregnancy.

“Obviously we had to change our positions and, in the last few months, we agreed that we would not make love, to avoid triggering contractions.” (Mark)

Perception of the child's presence

“[W]hile we were making love, while the baby is there...yeah, at one point I had a flash, I said to my girlfriend, ‘I’m stopping this.’ She said, ‘Why?’. But then... ‘The baby’s there, what if he can hear.’” (Alex)

Changing sexuality

Fathers find it difficult to dissociate their partners from the image of a mother.

“I was sympathetic during the previous pregnancies, so I also felt less attractive.” (Bob)

For some women, sexual desire does not change during pregnancy, it even increases.

SEXUALITY IN THE POSTNATAL PERIOD

Physical recovery of the new mother

Resuming sexual relations after birth is a low priority for couples.

Parenting demands and exhaustion

Parenting demands affect sexual activity as well moments of conjugal intimacy.

“You have to take care of the baby, the lack of sleep, and exhaustion, it means that sometimes you might feel a bit less like cuddling.” (Lara)

Integrating the baby into family life

Interruptions caused by the baby (such as crying) hinder sexual activity.

“Our couple’s bed is now a family bed...of course that changes how we relate.” (Yan)

Changing sexuality

Although more women mentioned a lack of sexual desire after childbirth, men also shared this feeling.

“The first two, three months, there was less interest...It wasn’t even on her part, it was on mine, which was rather unusual.” (Éliot)

COUPLES' STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING THE CHANGES IN THEIR SEXUALITY

Communication

It is challenging for couples to communicate regarding sexuality and to express frustrations that can arise from the changes they are experiencing.

Expressing one's sexuality, sensuality, and intimacy differently

The expression of love and affection is encouraged, more than sexual activity.

The quality of sexual relations is more important than the quantity.

Alternative sexual activities, without penetration, such as fellatio or female masturbation, are more frequent.

“[W]e know that our attraction for each other hasn’t changed (...) it’s just that physically, there was no charge left in the battery.” (Alan)

Giving it time

Women are generally confident that their sexual desire will return to normal).

One strategy for couples is to plan for moments of closeness, put sexual activities on the schedule, or plan “dates” for themselves.

Consulting

After birth, many couples say they needed to know that the changes were not permanent and were normal.

Fathers confide that it is difficult for them to go for consultation, even if it is beneficial.

For men, sharing can also happen among friends.

CONCLUSION

Clinicians should be aware that changes in sexuality may lead to a loss of intimacy in the relationship, and therefore to a distancing. They should pay attention to this dimension of conjugal life, as experienced by the two partners, by raising the topic of sexuality with both parents.

Sexual health should be included in public health programs.

REFERENCE

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