



He's
still your
baby.

It's Okay to Be Needy

Just because you have little humans who demand constant attention doesn't mean that you and your partner don't deserve TLC too.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, Ph.D.**

ONCE A MONTH, I teach a class called “Staying Happy as Partners When Becoming Parents” at a local hospital, for couples expecting their first child. Over and over, they’ve told me they’re worried that once there is a lovable bundle in the center of their lives, they won’t be able to be as close as they’ve always been.

Of course, children take time and energy. There are endless tasks to juggle and roles to fill. Pretty soon, limited time itself becomes a source of conflict and stress. The couples I work with in my practice regularly disagree about how to allocate their time. One husband wanted to hash out hurt feelings in bed

every night when his wife wanted to sleep. Another kept checking work emails when his wife wanted to catch up after the baby was finally asleep.

However, the biggest challenge that parenthood poses for partners isn't about time; it's about emotions. Before children, you were each other's “baby,” but now there's a real baby who needs your care. Bit by bit, you both may begin to prioritize “necessities” such as parenthood and work over “luxuries” such as tending to yourself and your relationship. You may even try to adopt the “adult” approach and accept that your feelings should take a backseat.

I've seen many parents stay silent about what they want or need for fear of making their partner mad. I've seen others base their self-worth on being all-giving, ignoring their own needs until they become depleted, resentful, or depressed. For many couples, the prohibition against being “needy” is exactly where the slippery slope to marital discontent begins.

Say it's 5:30 P.M., and you've just put the kids' dinner on the table after a long day. Your spouse has been in bed with a cold and calls for a glass of water. You think, with a flash of irritation, “He's such a baby when he's sick.” Before you know it, you're telling yourself a story about how he's too helpless or he's just like having one more kid.

Why is this? After all, giving and receiving care is part of being a loving couple. The difference is that once we have kids, we're so focused on their needs that we start thinking we shouldn't have any needs of our own. And when we feel too taxed, we try to solve the problem by needing less—or by thinking our partner should need less.

Imagine yourself as a big round bowl. During the day, different demands are being poured into the bowl, at rates and times you can't predict. As long as it isn't spilling over, you can cope. The dog throws up, the dishwasher breaks, the baby bumps his head—you may be filling up, but you're still holding it together. But then your mother calls to say she didn't get your birthday card and your partner texts about an unexpected late meeting. Now you have one (or two or three) demands too many. You

“overflow” and become overwhelmed. It’s hard not to get upset with the person who made that last demand and caused your bowl to slosh over its sides.

We feel terrible when we take that feeling out on our kids. Kids are kids, after all. They fill us with their demands all day long, whether it’s their endless questions, their sibling squabbles, or another poopy diaper. We spend a lot of emotional and physical energy trying to be as caring as possible because we know it’s unfair to get angry about our children’s needs. But in overwhelmed moments, it can seem almost reasonable to get angry about our spouse’s.

Here are three helpful steps you can take to deal with this ongoing challenge.

→ **Remember that depending on each other is good.**

The wellspring of closeness and connection is giving and receiving care, affection, understanding, and help. Whether you are age 2 or 42, depending on other people is healthy. Asking for help is healthy. We need support all along the road of life, from cradle to grave. And we especially need it from our partner. Continuing to turn toward your partner will make the parenting journey a lot more pleasurable and give your children a positive model of an intimate relationship. It’s also your best insurance policy for being contented when the kids eventually leave the nest.

→ **Resist blaming your partner (or yourself) for having needs.**

The problem isn’t the needs themselves; the problem is when we start to feel overwhelmed and then start criticizing each other for having them. For one couple I saw in therapy, the wife’s biggest “aha” moment was realizing the link between feeling swamped and thinking her husband was “clueless.” That allowed her to communicate her needs more clearly, without negativity or snark.

In situations like hers, it helps to remind ourselves of the same thing we tell our kids: Use your words. That means trying to ask respectfully, of course. It also means explaining what’s going on with you, rather than simply acting it out. For example, when you’re stressed, you can send a signal (by

burying yourself in Facebook), or you can say it: “I’d like to listen right now, but I’m so wiped out. Could we talk about this first thing in the morning?”

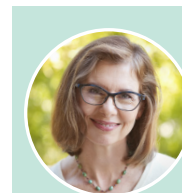
In the heat of the moment, we can’t always control our first reactions. But we can turn it around. For instance, if you blurted out, “Can’t you see I’m busy?” you can circle back and say, “I’m sorry I sounded annoyed. I wasn’t as patient as I wanted to be.”

→ **Accept that you can’t always meet each other’s needs.**

This step may be the hardest. When our partner fails to respond to our needs, it can leave us feeling unloved. John, a dad of two young kids, felt unloved when his wife didn’t want to have sex. In therapy, I helped him question his assumption that her lack of interest meant he was unlovable or that she was being unloving, and they learned to manage their differences in desire more constructively.

It’s also easy to feel inadequate or guilty about our own limits in taking care of those we love. But not being able to meet every need doesn’t make you bad; it just makes you human. If you can accept that there are (many) times in family life when it’s not humanly possible to give everyone what they need, you’ll be able to develop more gentleness and compassion toward yourself and others.

That’s why I tell expectant couples in my class that it’s good to be needy. It’s a sign you’re a vulnerable person who wants love from your partner. The challenge is to learn how to express your needs in a skillful way—low on shame, blame, or drama and high on tact, sensitivity, and self-control. Love is not about perfect behavior. It’s about understanding feelings and trying to respond the best you can. That’s true for parents, and for partners too. ✖



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