

HORMONES & CHROMOSOMES

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As any couple will tell you, having a baby can have a profound effect on your relationship. On one hand, parenthood takes you to a new dimension – this extraordinary shared experience; this overpowering sense of joint achievement; this glorious and beautiful product of your love. On the other hand, it lays the ground for the most bloody of battlefields, a frosty waste ground where swords are drawn at dawn, where chromosomes and hormones battle it out for who can claim to have done more work, who is more tired and who can cope best with the tantrums.

Recent research discovered that one issue parents argue about is who feels the most tired. I can believe it. I can also say, without any glimmer of feminist irony, that if a man knows what's good for him, he will always concede that it is his partner – we have to contend with the chunky thighs, the shredded nipples and the lion's share of baby vomit on our shoulder – at least give us the sleep deprived martyrdom we deserve.

Now my husband is fantastic. He changes nappies, he bathes our toddler, he even makes a mean Teddy Bear face scrambled egg with tomato eyes. But dare he even intimate that he is tired in the morning, after I've been up all night feeding our newborn while he has snored his head off beside me, and I could happily throw him out the bedroom window. This loving husband, who only minutes before had made me weak at the knees watching him roll about the bedroom floor with our toddler, now becomes the devil incarnate as he fails miserably to acknowledge and appreciate that while he may indeed be tired, on a scale

of one to ten, I am off the Richter scale, and to hear him complain is enough to send me (albeit irrationally) over the edge.

Discussing this issue at mother-and-toddler group, it seems to be a pretty universal complaint. In times BC (before children), having a man who was good in bed meant something entirely different (and how we got into this mess in the first place!). Now, being good in bed means he doesn't snore, doesn't look too cosy under the duvet as you struggle with nappy changes in the dark, and most of all, let you know how tired you must be (hug needed here) while not implying you look 104 (Oscar-winning performance here). A cup of tea first thing is the bonus that makes him a practical god in the bedroom. I know, I know, it's irrational, but let's just blame it on the hormones. Now, men tend to be grumpy in the mornings at the best of times (let's blame it on the chromosomes), but my husband had the audacity one morning to ask grumpily why I found it necessary to speak to our newborn baby in the middle of the night (by 'speak' you can translate soft cooings to stop her crying so as not to wake him!). Right there, right then for a split second before my withering look made him shrink to three foot tall and make a swift exit to the bathroom, I could have caused him some serious damage. Only for the fact we weren't in the kitchen where the sharp knives are kept, I'd be a single parent now.

Now, not many men know this – or at least they don't until their partner has a baby – but a woman's sanity hangs in the balance in a mere three minutes. At 6pm, she's sane, happy and not bothered by the yoghurt all over her top from toddler's tea. By 6.03pm, if hubby has not yet bounded



through the door to sweep toddler out of eye and ear range for 15 minutes, she is a fuming time bomb. They come home (late) to find the Wicked Witch of the West has moved in and taken charge of their children. Let's blame it on the hormones, but those XY chromosomes will need body armour if they don't get home on time!

It's easy, however, to get too complacent about our martyrdom, that we carry the lion's share of work, have the right to wear the thorny 'I am more tired' crown, and need a medal for keeping sane amidst the insanity of terrible two-dom. Deep down we know – although we would never, ever admit it out loud – that we are the lucky ones. We may watch the clock until they get home from work so we can hand the children over without a word and run upstairs to lock ourselves in the toilet because we've had a day of tears and tantrums; we may defy death by struggling out of bed, again, to soothe a little brow; and we may lose our reason over an uneaten plate of lovingly made new-recipe tuna pasta, but I suspect we wouldn't trade places for all the diamonds in Boodles. Because we also get the benefit of all those smiles and cuddles; we get to play puddle splashing and smear paint all over our hands to make pictures; we enjoy the pride of watching our beloved eat well. We get to watch them every second as they grow and develop and we get to see the delight on their faces as they achieve so many of their 'firsts'.

Somewhere along the way I had a change of heart (blame it on the hormones). I realised I don't have the monopoly on tiredness. He works hard and is allowed to feel tired too. He does his fair share of night-time soothing and still has to keep it together all day at work. For him there is no lunch-time nap when the little ones sleep. He's allowed to feel frustrated too – I may moan desperately about lacking adult company, but he doesn't get to enjoy our children's company all day. It must hurt to be waved off merrily by his daughter as we plan a long day of fun together without him.

Probably hormones and chromosomes will continue to battle it out for millennia ahead. But in the meantime, if there are any men reading this – for goodness sake, and for the survival of your relationship, make her a cup of tea in the morning and tell her you can't imagine how tired she is. And mums, don't be too hard on him if he yawns in the morning – their chromosomes just don't have what it takes!