

PILLOW TALK

ONE OF THE LAST TABOOS OF CHILDBIRTH – THE TOPIC THAT FLUSHES CHEEKS AND RAISES EYEBROWS THE MOST – IS SEX-LIFE AFTER BIRTH. IS THERE ONE? IS IT THE SAME? HOW SOON? HOW SORE? ARE YOU KIDDING?
WORDS BY **ALANA KIRK-GILLHAM**

As with virtually everything connected with childbirth and children, there just isn't an easy one-answer-fits-all. Some women need a lot of time to feel psychologically and physically ready, while others hop straight back on the horse. Probably the single biggest factor affecting amorous post-baby encounters is sleep deprivation. Annihilating exhaustion, especially in the first few weeks and months, can cleanly divide a previously complex lifestyle into two very simple modes – asleep and awake. Since the awake hours are filled to capacity with feeding, nappies, washing, eating, cooking and just keeping yourself and offspring barely alive, that leaves the asleep mode for just that – pure unadulterated, life-saving, marriage-saving, sanity-saving sleep. Even 20 minutes can get you through another cycle of feeding, burping and changing and keep the deranged woman within at bay. I have never been a good sleeper, always envying those lucky people who could merge with their duvet and clock out for eight to ten hours without so much as a toss and a turn. I've certainly never been able to cat-nap, close my eyes for forty winks, or tune out while watching Eastenders. Until I had a baby. Still at work when I went into labour, which lasted nearly two days, my energy reserves were pretty low before I even got home. Three weeks of four hourly feeds later, and I wasn't fit to know my name. There were times my husband thought the devil had moved in with him, so at least he wasn't being tempted to seduce me. But nature helped out so I didn't actually die (or kill my husband). I became the martini girl of sleep – proficient at nodding off anytime, anywhere, anyhow. At one point, I was sure I'd had an equine blood transfusion upon discovering I could even sleep standing up holding a dirty nappy in my hand – seriously, I was out for at least ten minutes! I became dispossessed. I







had narcolepsy. I could zone in and zone out with light-switch speed. If sleep deprivation is not a killer, it certainly can be a passion killer - let's face it, in those early days, what woman wouldn't prefer a sleep to a shimmy in the sheets? Even my husband, who was left with his libido fully intact, sought snooze over sex on many occasions. As he aptly put it, forget penis envy – its all about pillow envy. But there is a new type of romance that emerges at this time which doesn't, of course, have to culminate in shenanigans between the sheets. There are few sexier images than your exhausted partner sprawled asleep on the couch with your dozing baby on his chest, finished bottle slowly slipping from his hand.

Another strong argument for cuddles over coitus is sheer physical ability. I had a Caesarean, which meant I was not up for bedroom aerobics in the first few weeks, but also meant thoughts of intrusion where not the stuff of nightmares. The only advice I was given, and would give, is take your time, go slow and let things happen naturally, according to your body's recovery. And the upside is you can feel like a teenager again, working your way through the bases and reliving the good old days of heavy petting. Ability to have sex aside, there are other practicalities, which, if to be borne and overcome, need a sense of humour and a stern constitution (probably your partner's). There's nothing quite the passion killer if your man is put off by squirting boobs. Hey ho, as I told mine – this is intimacy at it's best!

Unfortunately, many women suffer from a lack of body confidence after the birth of their child. I think I resented this the most – after everything I had gone through with the pregnancy, birth and death-defying first weeks of sleep deprivation, I at least wanted to feel like the glorious goddess I should, having accomplished such a life-giving miracle. I still look at pictures of my honeymoon (one month before I got pregnant) – tanned, slim, carefree, sleep indulged, and I wonder will I ever look like that again. I took my first pregnancy as a licence to eat half a tub of Hagaan Daaz ice-cream every night for nine months, so no surprise it took me a

long time to get back into my pre-pregnancy clothes. I'm lucky in that my husband (at least pretends) to love me for me and not my figure, so I added floppy tummy to squirty boobs and told him he was lucky to have someone to sleep with who had such glorious padding. I'll always love him for agreeing whole-heartedly, saying who needs to be deadlegged by someone's hip bone? Barely able to find mine, I felt terribly reassured.

The early months can be hard (no pun intended), and I am lucky to be loved by a wonderful man who understood that we needed to go at my pace. He understood that 'no' meant 'not just now love, I'd rather run naked down the street than have sex at the moment, let me sleep for three months and I'll get back to you', and not 'never'.

He accepted me, bulges and all, because those bulges gave him the most precious thing in his life, his daughter. Some nights as our beautiful baby lay beside us in her carrycot, we just held hands, and I don't think we had ever loved each other as much.

Once the mind-numbing early months develop into a

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routine and your child starts to sleep through the night (or most of it at least), life returns a little to normal and the deranged woman within makes fewer and fewer visits. Many of the above factors still linger in the bedroom casting a shadow – albeit receding – on memories of your pre-baby sex-life. But – unromantic as it may seem – since every other successful aspect of baby-life comes down to finding a routine, so, perhaps for a while at least, sex needs to be scheduled. Maybe that's why baby's lunch-time naps were invented?

But for me, at least, the most important factor in keeping a marriage sane when madness prevails all around, is not the number of times a week the headboard gets shaken, but simply romance. All it takes is a look, a hug, and if you can find the energy to uncork a bottle, a cuddle on the sofa with a glass of wine between feeds. Eighteen months on, and pregnant again, we are still lacking the willpower to go out much, so we always make a bit of an effort on Saturday night with a special home-cooked meal and a bottle of wine. I even put on some lipstick. Occasionally, we talk about life before babies, sometimes we dream about holidays with built-in lie-ins, but mostly we talk about Daisy and the one on its way. And despite the seismic shifts in many aspect of our relationship, as we fall asleep on the sofa midway through the film, we know we wouldn't change a thing. ■