



## **Family Dynamics**

By

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As we prepare for the birth of a child, we all have certain thoughts, dreams and hopes as to what the future with our new baby might be like. How will we adapt to becoming a family or perhaps adding to the family with this new addition? We experience both physical and emotional changes as the pregnancy progresses from weeks into months and we prepare for our tiny bundle of joy to arrive. The physical changes are reinforced by preparation of the baby's new room, perhaps a baby shower and the ongoing care of Mom and her ever-expanding belly. In most cases lots of time is spent by parents, perhaps siblings and grandparents preparing for the new arrival and thinking about "how will things change?" What will life be like with a new baby? If you are like most, we think of the perfect scenario, the perfect birth, the perfect baby, the perfect family.... What happens to us when things don't go as planned?

\*Our dreams shatter when there is the realization that something did not go exactly as we had envisioned. Our lives have instantly changed and our roll as parents has become complex. In most cases the joy and celebration of the birth gives way to \*the uncertain future reality of having a child or children with unique challenges and special needs. The most common reaction to the news that something is wrong with your child differs from family to family and by gender as each member of the family struggles to cope in his or her own way and "put it right in their heads". The responses are individualized and may unite one couple and isolate another couple. The reaction of family and friends is very important too. Again in some instances all will be brought together and in other cases it is awkward and family members and friends may not know what to do or what to say or how to help so they keep their distance or just stay away.

Maternal instincts usually draw the mother to the child as she seeks to provide for the needs of her new baby. The father may seem lost at first...not knowing quite how to help his wife and child. Mom is usually in the hospital, at least early on and receiving care as is their baby but who is there to care for Dad? He is also going through emotional upheaval. Who does he have to talk to about his feelings and concerns? Who does he turn to for help and support? This is not always easy as men often keep things to themselves. Dad may be able to get some leave from work but this is not always possible and he might have to keep going without skipping a beat so to speak. In any case this is when the love and support of the extended family and friends is crucial. During this time supportive care is essential for both parents.

There is no doubt that some of you have heard of or even read the book Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, by John Grey this book clearly explains and explores the differences between men and women and that we each use different coping mechanisms and react differently to stress. Different coping capabilities may strain a relationship and this is where couples must take care to support each other by engaging in open conversations where each one can talk about how





they feel and what they feel. Communication is paramount.. Expressing your thoughts and concerns to one another is essential. It is also important to LISTEN to what you partner has to say. We all talk, but how many of us actively listen? There is no place for judgment, only sharing, no right or wrong, feelings are just that, feelings and they need to be voiced. If we can express what is on our mind, get it off our chest and talk about it we usually feel much better, perhaps less scared, more able to think it through, see the light, digest the news and come up with a plan of action. Open receptive communication between the couple should focus on the needs of the partners and include the feelings each is experiencing. It is most important to **“TAKE TIME TO BE A COUPLE FIRST”**. Together you can be united and strong and will better be able to meet the challenges that lie ahead and get through the process! It is often a delicate balance trying to manage the demands of a family with the added “special needs parenting” working, perhaps other children, and all that is involved in managing a home and trying to keep on top of things, not to mention trying to stay sane! Take time for yourselves, it doesn’t matter what you do or where you go just take a little time for yourselves \*with a dinner out, a walk, or a movie.\* If it is not possible to leave your child in the care of \*others perhaps you can just have someone come in and provide care while you and your sweetie are snuggled in the next room just spending time together. A little time or a lot of time depends on the situation. \*Either way, do schedule time together to regroup and talk about other events in your life.\* It is most important to keep everything in balance and not become consumed with the situation at hand, life still goes on. We just have to put one foot in front of the other and keep trudging, one step at a time, all the while trying to find some little enjoyment or being grateful for some little thing at the end of the day.

On top of what we are feeling inside there\*are still the outside factors \*of long hospitalizations, traveling to and from the hospital each day\*and perhaps lack of financial resources. How does one cope?\*

It is normal to want answers,- how did this happen, why did this happen, who is to blame? We all want to blame someone or something. \*The reality is, in some cases there is someone or something to blame but in most there is not.\*However difficult this may be, we MUST put blame aside if we are to move forward. \*Sometimes there are no answers and focusing on the negative negates you from attaining the best solutions in the most difficult of circumstances. \*We absolutely have to make peace with what has happened and move forward the best we can with the most positive energetic attitude possible. You may have to dig deep to find it, but you will be in a better place emotionally, physically and mentally if you can.

We sometimes get so caught up in what we are feeling and what we have to do it is easy to overlook how \*it is affecting other family members, our parents (grandparents) and our other children. It is important to keep everyone informed as to what the general situation is. \* The same is true for other children, share what is important but don’t overwhelm them and keep it to language they can understand. It’s also a good idea to include other children in \*procedures such as various therapies. Bring them along sometimes so they are aware of what is happening with





their brother or sister. \*This helps them to understand and can release any fears that they may have. We have five children in our family and our third child was\* only two when the twins were born. They both have cerebral palsy and low vision. When Eric was about four years old one of the twins was giving me a difficult time one morning while I was putting on his leg braces and eye patch, Eric looked at his two year old brother and said “ Matt its OK I used to have leg braces too and now that I am big I don’t need them any more” .This hit me like a ton of bricks....I had been so busy the past two years with hospital appointments, therapies, equipment, older kids homework, housework, life etc. that I had never even considered that Eric didn’t know that this was not “normal” for every kid. In his young mind he had assumed that if the only two babies he knew went through all this, so did every other kid including himself!

**Attitude is everything.** It determines how stressful information is received and how we react to it. A positive attitude will take you along the path to a successful outcome.\* It is important that you avoid self imposed stress such as feeling sorry for yourself or blaming yourself. This attitude helps no one and can only increase the existing stress level. Care must be taken to preserve longstanding friendships as they are part of your support \* system and link you to “your normal” past. Keeping as normal as possible even in dire circumstances, lessens thw frustration and resentment of your situation. It may take a little time for some friends to be comfortable in your given circumstance but realize we are all uncomfortable when we do not understand situations and circumstances. This is where communication can link the bonds of friendship and lessen the anxieties of the future. One day at a time is an excellent way to proceed along life’s path at this time.

\*As I said previously, it is normal to want answers, but as difficult as it may be to not have the answers, we **MUST** put it aside and move forward. These special children are a most precious gift keeping us in awe as we travel life’s pathways, leading us to mysterious places we didn’t know exist and rewarding us with a journey filled with trust, compassion, and unconditional love. Love, the most powerful of all energies, allows you to climb mountains, and take leaps of faith into uncertainty.

