

# Majority of couples remain committed to relationship after becoming new parents, researchers find

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Diaper changes, endless domestic chores, and lack of sleep—to name a few—are all stressors that couples face when they transition to

parenthood.

But UTM student Nathan Leonhardt, who is pursuing his Ph.D. in [social psychology](#), has found that this transition doesn't always mean relationship satisfaction and commitment declines.

The *Journal for Marriage and Family* recently featured Leonhardt's work, Relationship satisfaction and commitment in the transition to [parenthood](#): A couple-centered approach. The study was co-authored with other Canadian researchers including his advisor, UTM psychology professor Emily Impett and Natalie Rosen at Dalhousie University.

Leonhardt, who conducted the study over the duration of his Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship (funded by SSHRC), studied more than 200 couples from the prenatal stage to 12 months postpartum. They found that many of the couples retained high satisfaction and commitment into the first year of parenthood.

He and the team expected to find a percentage of couples to consistently report higher satisfaction and commitment in their relationships throughout this transition—but were surprised at just how many successfully navigated the period.

"The clear majority (81 percent) of the 203 couples navigated the transition with high commitment and at least moderately high satisfaction," Leonhardt says. "And we learned that a huge differentiation as far as who ended up transitioning well were people that had good relationships going into this transition period."

He says that many of the couples who had a more realistic outlook on parenthood, didn't avoid emotional connection with their partner, felt their partner helped them grow as a person, and believed their partner was committed to the relationship were those most likely to successfully

navigate the transition to parenthood.

Leonhardt and the team found no differences between demographics such as age or additional stressors, such as birth complications.

However, Impett notes that the sample of couples lacked diversity in that most were white, fairly well-educated and highly satisfied with their relationships going into the parenthood transition. The vast majority of the couples were also married.

"I hope that our findings can be replicated and extended in more diverse samples moving forward into the future," Impett says.

She adds that Leonhardt's work shows that, overall, people should have great reason for optimism going into parenthood.

"I think the focus on commitment as an outcome during the transition to parenthood is really important, and the take-home that most couples begin but remain highly committed over this life transition is a message that should be music to many couples' ears," Impett says.

Leonhardt agrees that his research can show couples that it is possible to navigate the transition to parenthood successfully.

He says he wanted to conduct this research because there is a common narrative that [relationship satisfaction](#) declines when transitioning to parenthood.

"I like being able to point out exceptions to the norm, to 'myth bust' a little bit," Leonhardt says. "So with something like the transition to parenthood, I wanted to be able to see if we could break some of the common narratives and give people a little bit more hope."

He adds that his findings suggest that couples shouldn't look to parenthood to save a troubled relationship.

The data showed that couples whose relationship was going well at the first time point (around five months pregnant) fared best throughout the transition, he says, adding that those who were faring poorly at the first time point tended to fare worse throughout the transition.

"As a general rule, if things aren't going well in your relationship, adding another person to this family probably isn't the thing that you should be doing to try to resolve any relationship problems that you have," he says.

Leonhardt's advice for couples echoes his research findings.

"If you both go into it with a sturdy relationship, you're committed to this together, you're realistic about both the challenges and opportunities that this transition holds, there's a better chance that you're going to navigate this successfully," he says.

Fascinated by [human relationships](#), Leonhardt would like to further examine why some couples might struggle in the early years, and how some couples create a successful relationship for life.

"If you were to ask somebody about the best and worst experiences they've had in their lives, there's a high percentage of experiences that would have something to do with their [relationship](#)," he explains. "It's just such an integral part of who we are as human beings and how we come to understand ourselves, and what's ultimately most important to us in our lives."

**More information:** Nathan D. Leonhardt et al, Relationship satisfaction and commitment in the transition to parenthood: A couple-centered approach, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2021). [DOI:](#)

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