

Early one Saturday morning, Emily Nackley trudged off to get schooled. She was heavily pregnant with her first child. But it wasn't a Lamaze childbirth technique class or an infant first aid course she was headed to: Emily and her husband Lloyd were off to pre-baby therapy.

At Seattle's Bringing Baby Home (BBH) workshop, the Nackleys gathered in a room with other expectant parents. They spent the next two days talking about how to maintain their marriages once the baby was born. They discussed honouring each other and becoming better friends. They learnt about the "end of day conversation", a concept that involves 20 minutes every day talking about anything other than the baby.

It was a surprise that the workshop was so couple-oriented. Every other class Emily and Lloyd had enrolled in had focused on the pregnancy: what prams and cots to buy, how to breastfeed and select a car seat. But this course was all about them – and how miserable they might be once their little bundle of joy arrived.

"I don't think it was what I expected. That sort of couples stuff is not something I'm used to," admits Lloyd.

"It is a little strange to be in the room," says Emily. "They talk about kind of intense topics. But all baby classes are like that: you're doing breathing exercises on the floor.

"At first you think these are neat tools; it was kind of fun to do," explains Emily, whose baby Louis is now nine months old. "But since we had the baby we've used it. Without it I would have probably just demonised my husband. It would be really easy to say, 'I'm working really hard and I don't think you are.' I'd be calling friends and complaining. But with our daily conversation, I'm seeing his world – the baby, his week at work – really well. And I don't talk about it with the mums I meet up with."

"I learned how tough it's going to be when the baby comes and how to deal with these new stresses," says Lloyd. "We'd got pretty good at sharing a space, having different opinions and different families. But it was about how to talk about these new situations. We could have done it [without the course], but our stress levels would have been higher."

There's no doubt that the juggernaut that is childbirth is stressful. Like divorce, or the death of a parent, it's one of the big-ticket life changes adults go through. It's scary and expensive; pile sleep deprivation on top, as well as a profound change in the status quo, and you're going to get some disharmony.

But parenthood is also something that men and women have been doing for centuries – without therapy. That's changing. In the US, pre-baby therapy has become the treatment du jour.

A bundle of joy can bring all kinds of misery, but American parents-to-be are heading it off at the pass. **Kirsten Matthew** examines the rise of pre-baby couple's counselling

LOVE AFTER BABY



Psychiatrists and counsellors across the country are devising programmes and workshops, and parents-to-be are signing up for them in droves. Girlfriends are even giving each other the therapy sessions as baby shower gifts.

The Relationship Research Institute, which created the BBH programme six years ago, hit on the idea

after investigating happiness in couples. "We followed couples from before they had a baby and after," explains Dr Renay Bradley, director of research and programming at the institute. Pairs were videotaped as they were put through a "conflict discussion" – a subject that would highlight any issues between the two – then left for 15 minutes to resolve it.



"Researchers coded that and looked for a series of communication patterns that are good or bad. In one-third of the couples there was no change [in conflict levels post-parenthood], but in the other two-thirds we saw this decline," says Bradley.

Other research backs up her findings: According to the *Wall Street Journal*, a 2006 study found that

couples that partake in this type of counselling enjoy a "much smaller decline in marital satisfaction over about five years compared with parents who didn't have the counselling". No wonder, then, that since The Relationship Research Institute launched BBH it has experienced high demand: it now has 800 educators teaching the course in

the US, Canada, and Australia.

In Chicago, at a five-centre psychotherapy practice called Urban Balance, therapists take up to 75 couples through a US\$500, six-session programme, or US\$300 workshop, each year.

"We prepare them for how it's going to impact their life or their lifestyle. What it's going to look like – less leisure, lack of sleep," says Urban Balance therapist Joyce Marter. "It's about reducing the negative impact. We're not going to get rid of stress, but we help make it as positive as possible."

Marter has her clients make a list of every single chore that will need to be done once the baby arrives, from 3am feeds to mowing the lawns. The couples then agree on who will do what. Boundaries when it comes to in-laws and friends are decided within the confines of her office too, as is whether it's okay to post photos of the baby on Facebook and Twitter.

Isn't this all stuff that a healthy, functional couple could – maybe even should – discuss alone, at home, without therapeutic intervention? That's what happened a generation or so ago. Or it wasn't discussed at all, and instead new parents muddled along.

"We've glorified parenting of the past but in the past there were more networks among parents. It's just not the same as living in and out of each others' houses along the street," says Jean Fitzpatrick, a psychoanalyst and couples therapist in Manhattan. About 20 percent of her clients are enrolled in pre-baby therapy; she also specialises in premarital and affair recovery counselling.

Most couples need only three or four personalised sessions, Fitzpatrick says. "Everybody has different health issues, support systems, work schedules. Sometimes they're dissatisfied with the parenting they had and worry they won't be good parents. So they need confidence building."

In a way, Fitzpatrick and her comrades are taking the place of community – the family and friends who once helped new mothers and fathers through that transition period. Such support networks are less common these days, so professional, paid help is picking up the slack.

"It makes a big difference," Fitzpatrick says. "It keeps partners glued together in the mountains of work and doting on the baby. These things can get lost when the baby comes. There's a certain amount of isolation. You're stuck in your apartment coping. You think everyone else couldn't possibly be going this crazy when actually they are." >>>

CLIENTS LIST EVERY CHORE THAT WILL NEED TO BE DONE, FROM 3AM FEEDS TO MOWING THE LAWNS. THEY THEN AGREE ON WHO WILL DO WHAT



Something's come between us: for two thirds of couples, conflict increases after parenthood.

Perhaps another reason for the demand is that the current generation expects far too much from the experience. Who wouldn't be dissatisfied, no matter how lovely their new baby is, after weeks of very little sleep and the endless cleaning up of bodily functions?

"It's not new that relationship satisfaction declines; we're just more open about it," explains Dr Bradley. "If you're not sure what to expect, or have been trying for a long time to have a baby – people feel guilty that they're a miserable mess. In the past, people put on a cover and didn't share their true feelings."

Fitzpatrick agrees. It's more difficult, she points out, for highly organised people to adapt to a situation that is unknown and full of trepidation.

"It requires creativity – that is sometimes a real challenge. Women are living as parents in a different way to their parents and grandparents. They've postponed it to focus on their careers and now they have to figure out what it means to step to the side and focus on the child, instead of a meteoric rise."

Unsurprisingly Fitzpatrick has zero cynicism about the concept of pre-baby therapy: "It's really important to see it as a caring, smart effort by parents to try to navigate the next phase of their life in a way that's good for the baby and

their marriage. Love isn't enough. It's work."

Whether pre-baby therapy would work in New Zealand, where folk tend to be less keen to overshare and more stoic about life's ups and downs, is questionable. But there's interest in it. Kiwi midwives have already approached Bradley and her cohorts about bringing the BBH workshop here.

But New Zealand mothers I canvassed scoffed at the very notion of it. "How self-obsessed!" exclaimed one. "I don't think any amount of therapy will help with lack of marriage satisfaction when you have no sleep."

"I can't see much of a call for it," said another, a mother of three. "I think a more useful therapy would be how to get your baby to sleep."

Marter concedes that not everyone considers therapy to be normal and healthy. "Some people say this generation is narcissistic. People expect to be happy and want a full, balanced life now. They don't view life as working through hardship and surviving, like generations before. But there are good things about caring about yourself and wanting a balanced life."

So long as you don't expect a course of pre-baby therapy to solve all your problems.

"I think that no one can truly know what it's like until they go through it," says Marter. "There's so much emphasis on the positive, so they're blindsided by how hard it is. A realistic plan may have helped me to be more clear about my needs in my marriage, and my boundaries. But there's no way one can really know until they're getting up every two hours, day in and day out. It's traumatic." ★

**NEW ZEALAND MOTHERS
I CANVASSED SCOFFED
AT THE VERY NOTION OF
IT. "HOW SELF-OBSSESSED!"
EXCLAIMED ONE**

