

Mom! It's time for work

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Oh, the guilt ...

Jessica Stern felt it strongly six weeks after the birth of her daughter, just when she was scheduled to return to work as a senior vice president at a Boston advertising agency.

"I also felt guilty about actually enjoying my work and some time spent away from my child," says Stern, whose daughter is now 7 months old.

Her transition back to work was made more difficult by the natural hormonal changes that occur after childbirth. Like Stern, many mothers who return to work face a myriad of challenges, some of which they never expected.

Nevertheless, experts say that transition need not be very difficult if new moms take time to do a little emotional and practical advance preparation.

San Francisco parent coach Amber Rosenberg admits that gearing up for such a big life change always is at least a little difficult because a new mother never truly knows how she will respond to the child until after their son or daughter is born. Some women swear they'll return to their careers as soon as possible but melt as soon as they embrace their newborn for the first time. Others, who have spent weeks or months fantasizing about motherhood and the idea of staying with a baby all day, may find that they need a break to get through the long days of caring for an infant.

"You need to give yourself time to figure things out," Rosenberg says.

One of your first priorities when doing that: finding out exactly what your company's policies are regarding maternity leave, how they apply to you directly, and what the Family and Medical Leave Act says.

Rosenberg says that if it is at all possible you should transition back to work slowly. If an employer provides three months of paid leave, for example, consider taking a six-week maternity leave and then returning for 1.5 months on a part-time basis.

And if you are having trouble, don't be afraid to discuss your return-to-work strategy with a professional who can help you come up with a plan that suits you, your family and your company.

Stern did just that when she approached Rosenberg about her post-partum plan. They came up with a plan to work three days a week for three months before returning on a full-time basis.

Pat Katepoo of WorkOptions.com, a career advisory site, encourages her clients to research how other new moms have restructured their working life to include job sharing, part-time employment, telecommuting or a combination of the three.

Future mothers who suspect they might need a more flexible schedule should relay that idea to their bosses at about the same time that they announce their pregnancies. A plan is not needed at that point, but at least it warms bosses to the idea, Katepoo says.



"Remember, one of your boss's greatest concerns is whether you plan to return to your job. Having a solid transition plan ahead of time provides reassurances of your return," she adds.

She also advises moms-to-be to work hard at negotiating a longer-than-normal maternity leave.

"Recognize that nervousness about negotiating is normal, just as a job interview or pay raise request might be," she says.

That's why it's important to practice first, just as with an interview.

Once you start maternity leave, do not fret about the future too much. Things have a way of working out, experts agree.

Carol Fishman Cohen, co-author with Vivian Steir Rabin of the recently released book "Back on the Career Track: A Guide for Stay at Home Moms who Want to Return to Work" (Business Plus, 2007), consults with many women who did not return to work as soon as they thought they would.

Women who take a career hiatus for longer than 18 months have separate issues to deal with than those returning from a shorter maternity leave. They will likely have to update their professional skills, for example, assess their career options and, perhaps most importantly, rebuild their self-confidence.

"For the re-launcher, the difficult part is balancing re-emerging ambition with the reality of daily life at home," Cohen notes. "Recognizing you have unfulfilled career ambitions is one of the first steps of a successful re-launch."

Mothers returning from a short leave also will need to redefine their ambitions and even their definition of success.

Stern recalls having to redefine "what success means to me and working on permission to let go of old definitions of success which no longer serve me," she says.

Rosenberg says mothers should feel free to talk about their apprehensions and their needs, including ultra-practical ones such as having access to an adequate space for pumping breast milk.

"You can't expect your boss and colleagues to be familiar with what you're going through," she says, "so whatever you need, make sure you speak up."