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CAREER

Back to Work



USA TODAY's Christine Neff relaunched her career 18 months after the birth of her daughter. Here she provides a step-by-step plan for rekindling your professional self.

remember the very minute I decided to go back to work.

My daughter was 14 months old and, as usual, in my arms, joined by the three stuffed dogs that never left her side. Juggling the lot of them, I danced around our living room, chanting, "We're dancing with dogs, dancing with dogs," over and over again.

My daughter squealed with laughter. The dogs barked electronically. I had an aching back and plummeting self-esteem. Is this what my life had come to? Dancing with stuffed dogs?

Clearly, it was time for me to rekindle my professional self. But how? I had been out of the workforce for nearly a year and a half, beaten down and exhausted by parenting's daily grind. I had no idea where to start the job search or who would hire me, a mom.

But I had to figure it out. When my daughter napped that day, I wrote a to-do list: "Plan life. Plan career. Get to work." Simple enough, right?

Like me, the majority of mothers in the U.S. have been faced with the challenge of going back to work after having a baby or after spending time at home raising children. Stay-at-home dads, who, by some counts, now number in the hundreds of thousands in the U.S., face the same challenges when transitioning back to the workforce.

But it can be done. Seventy-one percent of the nation's mothers and countless dads are proof of it. If you're thinking about joining us, this expert to-do list can help get you back on track—and back to work. Simple enough.

STEP 1

You think you want to go back to work

Visualize life as a working parent. How does it make you feel? What is the ideal situation for you and your family?

Carol Cohen, co-founder of iRelaunch.com and co-author of *Back on the Career Track*, recommends a period of contemplation when deciding whether to head back to work. Even thinking about it can be a difficult task fraught with insecurities and seemingly overwhelming obstacles—a "floundering period," as she describes it.

To get started, she says, "Divide the question into three categories: What is my



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desire for work itself, how hungry am I to go back to work right now, and what are my childcare responsibilities right now."

Gretchen Reid, a life coach and founder of Motherhood Transitions, says to picture your ideal working life based on your

family's needs, commitments, and personal goals. "Figuring out a career that will really work with you and your family and is in line with your guiding lights is the most important place to start," says Reid.

If you're returning to work out of necessity rather than

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■ **COMMUNICATION:** Keep your kids in the loop. Talk to your family early and often about returning to work, and be honest, says career consultant Carol Cohen.

Make sure your kids know that your interest in a day job is not a rejection of your life at home with them but an opportunity to focus on a part of yourself that was put on the back burner.

If you can afford it, hire a babysitter or put your kids in the afterschool program while you're in the job-search phase to allow your kids to adjust gradually to a change in their routine.

choice (if your spouse has been laid off or an unexpected expense threatens your family's financial well-being), you may not have the luxury of reflection. Cohen recommends taking an interim job that may not be a perfect fit and then figuring out your next career move from there.

STEP 2

You know what you want and what will work for your family

Now starts the legwork. Tap into all of your professional connections, past and present, update your resume and online profiles at sites like LinkedIn.com, and start looking for job leads.

If you haven't gone through the employment process in awhile, know that things have changed. Nearly everything is done online »

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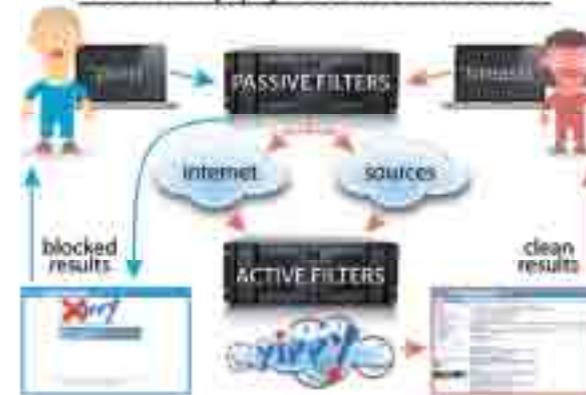
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■ **SELL YOUR ASSETS:** Know what you bring to the table. Career consultant Carol Cohen calls parents who are going back to work a “gem of the workforce.” They take less maternity and paternity leave and have a more stable lifestyle, great work experience, and enthusiasm about returning to the job. Sell yourself during the interview by mentioning these traits.

these days, and networking online and in-person is the key to success, especially in this economy.

“Tap into traditional networks—alumni groups, job networking groups—and even your moms’ groups,” says Reid. Don’t discount those co-workers who were junior to you in your last position. If they stayed in the workforce, they could be potential supervisors now.

Cohen reminds her clients to stay confident. You may be just a sweatpants-wearing, baby-lugging mama now, but your previous work connections don’t know that. “Remember that people’s view of you is frozen in time. When you get back in touch with people with whom you went to school or worked, they will remember you as you were ... You will get a great sense of confidence-building when you hear their enthusiasm about your interest in work,” she says.

STEP 3

You score an interview

Prepare, prepare, prepare. This is your chance to show a potential employer why a seasoned, if rusty, hire is a better fit for your coveted position than just any young gun.

Reid likes to walk her clients through the interview process by going through their resumes, discussing old projects they worked on and volunteer successes. “Just the fact of thinking through these things and putting language around them helps prepare for the interview,” she says.

Also, brush up on your industry news by reading the newspaper (you know, that thing your toddler likes to color on) and publications for the field. Consider attending a professional conference.

In the interview, when it comes to addressing your break from the workforce, be bold and brief, suggests Cohen. “Acknowledge it briefly, don’t apologize for it, then move on to why you’re the best person for the job. Say, ‘I have been on a career break to care for my children, but now I can’t wait to get back to work. The reason I was so excited about this particular position ...’”

STEP 4

You get an offer—celebrate, then calculate

Money matters, especially when it comes to providing for your family. Adding a salary to your family’s income may seem like a no-brainer, but that’s not always the case.

BEFORE ACCEPTING AN OFFER, WEIGH THE STARTING SALARY AGAINST THESE EXPENSES:

- Childcare
- Housekeeping/dry cleaning
- Work lunches/takeout dinners
- Commuting
- Tax implications

Even if you only break even for the first couple of years, the job may still be right for you. “Over time, those childcare expenses will decrease and your income will increase. Those first few

years are an investment in the more-profitable years to come,” says Cohen.

In addition to finances, seriously consider the logistics of the job: Will the hours work for you and your family, is the commute acceptable, do you have daycare options (and backup plans) lined up?

Also think through what Reid calls your guiding lights: values, strengths, personality style, personal purpose, and life situation. Ask yourself, “Does this opportunity match

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■ **ECONOMY:** Don’t get discouraged by the nightly news. The health of the national economy may have less of an effect on your job search than you would think. “Focus on yourself and what you want to do, regardless of what’s going on in the economy,” says career consultant Carol Cohen.

“I have seen people return to work consistently all through the recession. It’s not related to how many years they are out of the workforce. It’s related to how good they are at focusing on exactly what they want to do.”

up with these guiding lights? If it’s not ideal, can I live with the areas that don’t match up?” she says.

STEP 5

You start tomorrow

Breathe deep—life’s about to get hectic, in a good way.

As any parent knows, organization and preparation lead to success on the home front. By now, you should have talked to your children about the changes heading your family’s way and introduced them to a new routine. Map out a plan for that first day back, leaving some extra time for unexpected tantrums, lost schoolbooks, and forgotten cellphones.

Be prepared for the stress that comes with the transition, but keep your eye on the prize. “This will affect every aspect of your life: your relationship with your spouse, the time you have available for your children, your ability to take care of yourself ... You need to make sure that you don’t get so totally consumed by the job that you aren’t available to yourself, community, and family,” says Reid. ■

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→ career

When 9-to-5 becomes routine

Expert advice for managing your time, dealing with stress, and getting over the guilt once and for all



AMBER ROSENBERG, mother of two and professional life and career coach for working moms, helps her clients stay sane as they juggle careers and family life. She spoke with USA TODAY’s Christine Neff about ways to be your best self at work and home.

Q:

Every working mother deals with the work-life conflict. How can we better manage our time and energy to be our best selves at work and home?

A) First, learn how to delegate. Start by taking a look at your to-do list and ask yourself some honest questions. What on my to-do list do I absolutely need to take care of myself versus what can I ask for help with? Then, choose which actions you can delegate to other staff, your partner, your family members, your friends, etc. The best way to help yourself is to ask for help.

Second, learn how to say no, a critical skill you can build as a working mother. By saying no to one thing, you’re allowing yourself to say yes to something else that may be more of a priority for you. If you don’t prioritize your time, others will be more than happy to do it for you.



Q. Often, a big part of going back to work is overcoming the guilt of leaving your children. What can mothers do to manage this change?

Guilt is a given for every working mother, and while you can’t completely eliminate guilt, you can learn how to better manage guilt. So, the next time you feel guilty, shine a spotlight on guilt. Get really curious about it. What happened right before you started to feel guilty? What’s the cost of feeling guilty? What’s the benefit? Spend a minute writing down everything that comes up for you. Better awareness of guilt leads to better management of guilt. As you practice this technique, you’ll find you spend less precious time and energy feeling guilty.

Q. What can mothers do to deal with the stress that comes with raising a family and growing a career?

First, you can talk with your partner or folks in your support network about what your ideal work-life vision (with less stress) looks like. You’ll save time and energy and build the support you’ll need to make your vision a reality.

Second, be sure to communicate at work too. Talk regularly with your manager and/or staff

about your schedule, priorities, and options. Only you know what you need to find equilibrium in your roles of mother and professional, so speak up.

Third, you can stop beating yourself up and be kind to yourself by lowering your expectations. If you want to maintain your sanity and sense of well-being, adopt the mantra, good is good enough.

Fourth, you can learn to get comfortable with constant change. Once you can embrace rather than resist the constant change that motherhood brings, you’ll experience much less stress. Working motherhood calls for you to be agile and adaptable. Work on stretching that muscle.

Fifth, you’ll lower your stress by creating a childcare safety net. It helps to know that your children are getting the best care possible. Listen to your intuition when choosing childcare and create plans B and C for the inevitable emergency needs.

Last, but not least, schedule self-care activities (yoga, solo walks, deep breathing, meditation, journaling, painting, etc.) into your calendar as non-negotiable dates and times. Self-care is the best thing you can do to manage your stress, and it positively affects your job and family as well.