

Back to work ... as a mom

By Alandra Johnson / *The Bulletin*

Published: October 17, 2008 4:00AM PST

The breaking point for Bend mom Shannon Hinderberger came in early September. She had just returned to work after taking three months off for maternity leave for the birth of her son, Ben. The 33-year-old had always been very career-minded and enjoyed her job as marketing coordinator for Bend Memorial Clinic.

But heading back to work proved much harder than she expected. On her blog ("No Longer Knocked Up in Bend") Hinderberger poured out all of her feelings into a post called "What they don't tell you."

"My enthusiasm is gone because of the pressure I feel under each day (and being deprived of sleep too). The pressure of doing an awesome job at work and being creative and then coming home and taking care of Ben, the laundry, dinner and day-to-day stuff. My poor dog needs to be groomed. My house is filthy. I don't think the mail has been picked up since Saturday. Oh and being a good wife too. The pressure is getting to me and sometimes I have no idea how to handle it except cry."

Now more than a month later, Hinderberger is feeling a bit better, but still finds juggling the demands of family with work to be a challenge and somewhat overwhelming at times.

She is far from alone with these feelings.

Helping individuals and companies sort out issues surrounding maternity leave is a speciality Ferne Traeger, a psychoanalyst and career consultant in New York. She says many women are blindsided by the challenges.

"It doesn't feel like they are playing either part very well," said Traeger.

Missing out?

Hinderberger assumed she would miss working while off on maternity leave. But she didn't really.

"I basically focused on my baby for three months. It was amazing."

It wasn't until about a month before Hinderberger had to return to work that she began to realize how hard the transition would be.



Greg Cross / The Bulletin



Pete Erickson / The Bulletin

Bend mom Shannon Hinderberger feeds her baby, Ben, on Wednesday evening. Hinderberger has written on her blog about the challenges of returning to work after maternity leave.

By the numbers

The first time she dropped Ben off at his day care, she cried. It was “a big smack in the face.”

She realized that by the time she got home after work, she would have only an hour or two with Ben before his bedtime. Recently, she learned Ben rolled over for the first time at his day care. She wonders what other milestones she'll miss while at work.

Nancy O'Reilly, Missouri clinical psychologist and founder of the Web site WomenSpeak, says guilt is the No. 1 issue facing women returning from maternity leave.

Bay Area mother of two Laura Lowell remembers wondering, “Can't somebody just tell me how to do this?” about her struggles juggling her roles at work and home. That question spurred her to write the book, “42 Rules for Working Moms,” which is a compilation of tips and techniques she collected from fellow working moms. Coming back from maternity leave feels like a big change because it is, according to Lowell. Having a baby does change a person, and it's physically and emotionally exhausting.

One of the biggest obstacles facing new moms is their struggle with conflicting feelings. They like their work but also want to be a good mom.

“It takes so much energy to be conflicted,” said Lowell.

Workplace challenges

O'Reilly believes working moms should find out about their company's policies regarding family-friendly options, like flex time, job sharing and telecommuting. It doesn't hurt to ask questions and find out what's available.

The longer maternity leave a company offers, the more likely a woman is to return to work, according to research from Jennifer Glass, a professor of sociology at Cornell University. These results are based on her study that followed 350 pregnant women in 1991 until 1998. In addition, companies that allowed women to slowly phase back into work were also better at retaining these working mothers.

Child care was another huge factor.

“They really did see child care arrangements as a lifeline,” said Glass. When these arrangements failed or faltered, many moms had to drop out of work.

Attorney Lauren Stiller Rikleen is dedicated to helping law firms retain and promote working mothers as the executive director of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success. She came into this line of work after watching numerous women leave the profession partly because of the demands it made on their families. She believes working mothers still carry a stigma in the workplace.

“You're judged differently when you're a working mother.”

Sometimes the prejudice comes from women of an older generation who came up the hard way and say “nobody helped me.”

New direction

Sarah Laufer moved to Bend in 2005 and went to work practicing law at a small local firm. She juggled work with being a new mom to her infant daughter, Chloe.

36 percent of pregnant women quit their jobs before giving birth in 1981-85.

25 percent of pregnant women quit their jobs before giving birth in 2001-03.

49 percent of women took some form of paid leave from their jobs after giving birth in 2001-03.

39 percent of women took some form of unpaid leave from their jobs after giving birth in 2001-03.

17 percent of women in 1961-65 had returned to work a year after giving birth.

64 percent of women in 2001-03 had returned to work a year after giving birth.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau report “Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns of First-Time Mothers: 1961-2003,” issued in 2008

When Laufer became pregnant with her second child, however, she realized that the firm didn't offer any maternity leave. Laufer managed to take off six weeks before returning to work full time. But soon she realized it wasn't working out.

"It's not where my priorities were any more. I didn't love my job enough to give up being a mom."

She looked into doing contract work or working part time, but those were shot down.

So she quit being a lawyer to work from home on a very different venture. She created an online retail store for kids' outdoor apparel, Play Outdoors.

Laufer is worried about the economy and whether her business, which just started this month, will be successful. But she thinks the change was good and ultimately the best answer for her family.

Support

Working moms often struggle to talk about their problems, according to Lowell, because they don't know who to turn to. They end up stuck keeping their conflicted feelings to themselves.

South Florida moms Debbe Taylor and Allison Nazarian created their own Web site to help reach out to fellow working moms (www.workingmomlifeline.com). They both returned to work soon after having their children.

"A lot of it comes down to letting go of the ideal vision you had in mind," said Taylor.

Nazarian says many moms feel they need to do everything themselves. She encourages working moms to ask for help and to seek out a sounding board.

"Let it all out. You'll feel like the weight of the world has been lifted off your shoulders."

Support from others is a big help to Hinderberger. She says her coworkers have been great.

Husband Brian Hinderberger, 36, offers reassurance and comfort when she starts feeling guilty or inadequate. He also tries to take on certain duties, like getting Ben ready in the morning.

"Right now it's getting a little easier. The biggest strain for her is not feeling like she's doing a good job," said Brian. His role is to reassure her that, yes, she is doing a good job.

He also misses Ben while he is at work. By chance, Brian was able to work from home for a stint during Shannon's maternity leave. He misses getting to see his son during the day and tries to make up for it on weekends.

Hinderberger also credits her co-workers and friends for their understanding and support. Visitors to her blog also offer kind words of understanding. Her first week back, she got numerous calls from friends just to see if she was OK. Hinderberger wishes she could turn to her mom, who was a single mom for many years, but she died years before Ben was born. Hinderberger remembers her mom as always happy, never tired and still able to have a clean house.

She wonders how she did it.

"I wish she was here to ask."

Tips

One of Lowell's favorite tips in her book came from a single mom who suggested parents "observe the peace." This means going into her son's room and watching the little boy sleep for a minute or two each night. Moments like this help remind her why she had

a child in the first place.

Another favorite tip for working moms is to avoid buying unnecessary products and devices. Lowell uses wipe warmers as an example. She thinks a lot of these products prey on the guilt working moms feel, while providing nothing of use.

Taylor's best advice for new moms learning to juggle responsibilities is to think of time in little manageable chunks. Otherwise, moms can feel overwhelmed with their never-ending to-do list. She's also a big believer in the power of deep breaths and having faith in one's self.

Developing specific job descriptions can also be helpful, according to O'Reilly. She suggests women make one list for work and one list for home. This can help settle chore and household issues. She also believes women need to figure out a way to care for themselves and to build that into their plan.

Outsourcing chores is a good option for those who can afford to do so. "You're not going to be a perfect housekeeper you used to be," said O'Reilly. "Don't feel guilty about calling a maid."

Some moms have learned to cut back on certain activities they did pre-baby. Hinderberger, for instance, has dropped most of her hobbies (save blogging).

Laurie Kelley, assistant vice president for marketing and communications at the University of Portland, says it doesn't get easier the more children one has. When her kids were 11, 9, 4 and newborn, she felt as though she could never get all the laundry done and never sent out all her thank-you notes to people who sent presents for the baby. When Kelley first started her career, she felt as though you could work and have a family and it would be easy. The truth was much more complicated. Liking her profession also makes a big difference. And while she misses out on things, like getting to volunteer for her kids' schools, work provides other benefits. She learned to let go of the guilt.

"If you enjoy your work, don't feel bad about it."

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Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2008

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