

The 'Motherguilt' of a Career Woman

SUE-ELLEN WATTS

As I sit and embrace the ritual of my weekly mothers group, watching eight glowing mothers with their eight beautiful babies, I feel enormous satisfaction that 'we' - as women and as mothers - have achieved so much. I watch as each mothers' eyes haze over with the overwhelming sensation of pride and I smile gently to myself, nodding ever so slightly in reassurance of our feelings. In that moment, I lean back in my chair and casually ask "So, has everyone organised their childcare ready to return to work?"

Silence hits the room and dark clouds rumble overhead as eight shocked faces whip around, eyes glaring in astonishment at the person who asked the unspeakable to enormously proud and extremely satisfied mothers. Ok, so that's a bit melodramatic. In fact, there were no dark clouds, and I'm not even sure if there was complete silence; but I must admit there was definitely a sinking sensation in my chest - and it was certainly GUILT.

Not one mother in my mothers group had considered returning to work within the first 12 months, let alone taken action in organising childcare. Ideally, most desired never to return to work if finances permitted. So what was wrong with me? Was I a bad mother for looking forward to getting back into work and growing my business? Did I love my son less than these mothers because I had other personal goals to achieve beyond being a great mum? Surely there are working mums out there that chose to return to work because they wanted to - not because they had to... Aren't there?

The questions kept emerging, entering my mind rapidly and exiting just as quickly as the next presented itself. Over and over I tried to ignore them while justifying my 'casual question', to myself more than anyone, and yet the feeling of guilt sat idly in their midst.

Taking a quick look through the history of statistics of mothers returning to the workforce we can see how far 'we' - as women and as mothers - have embraced such an opportunity. As recently as 1986, the typical mother waited until her youngest child had turned six before resuming work.

In 2001, the age of the youngest child

when a majority of mothers were employed had fallen to two years. The latest data for 2006 has halved the figure again, to just one year.

The notion that a mother should be at home raising children for 'a few years' is out of date; and it is here the fine print is the most telling. In 1996, only 32 per cent of women with a baby aged less than 12 months were back at work. At the August 2006 census, the employment rate had risen to 40 per cent.

In this time of economic uncertainty and financial tension it is easy to assume

mothers returning to work 'Must' rather than 'Want'. Despite this notion, and the lack of contemporary statistics to clarify the distinction between mothers who 'Want' to return to work and those who 'Need' to, there is an overwhelming social trend that more and more women are returning to the work, whether self-employed or to an office, within the first 12 to 18 months of giving birth.

Despite this social trend of mothers returning to the workforce sooner rather than later it seems the underlying issue of guilt which frequently overrides any feelings of excitement undoubtedly remains persistent. So why do we still feel this intoxicating sensation, commonly referred to as 'Motherguilt'?

Most generally, this guilt stems from the notion that the mother is the primary care-



'Motherguilt' often arises when the decision to place your child into childcare becomes a reality. Although the ultimate decision to put your child into childcare may seem acceptable, it is the actual moment when you become physically separated from your child that the most aggravating guilt ignites.

taker of the family; and as such must be in constant sight, reach and contact with their children in order to be the mythical, all nurturing ideal of the "best mother possible".

Similarly, there is an expectation that once children arrive, they are our principal priority and as mothers our personal goals must be sacrificed in order to raise them properly. It is the sensation that we are investing more time and energy into ourselves than our children that has us tearing the hair from our heads.

'Motherguilt' often arises when the decision to place your child into childcare becomes a reality. Although the ultimate decision to put your child into childcare may seem acceptable, it is the actual moment

when you become physically separated from your child that the most aggravating guilt ignites.

As mothers 'choosing' to return to the workforce, it is not uncommon for this 'motherguilt' to escalate if not identified and accepted. I am a mother and a career woman who chose, without hesitation, but with immense guilt, to return to the workforce before my sons first birthday.

In saying this, my return was not immediately in a full time capacity. I wanted to return to work while also treasuring the birth of my son. By implementing an action plan which would allow me to satisfy personal goals of career achievement WITH goals of attending to my son I was able to

accommodate both objectives and harness the rage of 'motherguilt'. Overall I wanted a plan where it was possible to be a mother and a businesswoman – and do both well.

I found a childcare centre with wireless Internet connection so I could work on site while being immediately available to breastfeed. I didn't launch back into fulltime work; instead, I started by only working four hours a day for three days a week. This meant I was able to 'test the waters' so to speak. I was able to run my business and breastfeed my beautiful baby boy without having to deal with separation anxiety. Slowly as I became more comfortable with being a mother and a businesswoman I increased the amount and frequency of my work.

With this action plan in place I was able to launch a new business, take on staff and continue to breastfeed well past my son's first birthday.

I understand that in retrospect it may be easy to overlook the 'motherguilt' that comes with this territory as we never like to remember the difficult moments. However, by learning to accept the guilt and implementing a 'realistic' action plan which satisfied all your goals the 'motherguilt' was able to subside.

As I reflect on my decision to return to the workforce I have accepted that the guilt should not be put back on me for desiring such a challenge; because most significantly in returning to work I am a better mother for my son, a better wife to my husband, and most importantly a better person to myself.

Create a good support network around you: surround yourself with reliable support from family, friends, home, and office – this will allow to recognise that people support and appreciate your decision.

Establish a great relationship with your employer: this may allow the opportunity for more flexible hours and greater understanding of your personal commitments as well as allowing yourself to see the bigger picture.

Work stays at work: turn off the mobile phone and computer after you finish work rather than being reachable 24/7. If you work from home, you need to establish set hours and stick to them.

Schedule weekly family time: allow one night a week for family time – no computer, no TV.

Celebrate 'small-wins': congratulate yourself on achieving tasks at home and at the office. When you are constantly extremely busy it's easy to lose sight of what you have achieved at different levels.

Implement a 'realistic' action plan: although all mothers are 'Super Woman' the hours in a day just don't allow us enough time and energy to play this role immediately once returning to work. Start by working a few hours a day, a few days a week and increase when you know you are ready.

About Sue-Ellen Watts

Sue-Ellen Watts, mother and founder of external human resources company Watts Next, www.wattsnext.com.au has made a career out of empowering businesses and individuals to achieve their full potential – both in their working and personal lives. The service enables clients to enjoy the business and reduces the stress HR can often cause.



www.wattsnext.com.au