

Back to work

Are you feeling ready to swap those sneakers for heels? The coffee group catch-up for a staff room cuppa? Or the play date for a boardroom update? VICTORIA WELLS looks at how to prepare for your return to work

When you're immersed in the world of full-time motherhood with your own routine of naps and outings it's easy to be caught off guard by the steady tick of the calendar and the looming date of your reappearance at work.

No matter how long your period of maternity leave – whether three months or a whole year – the prospect of returning to work after having your baby can be a daunting one, and for many different reasons.

There are practical elements to consider (notifying your employer of your intention to return, breastfeeding or expressing at work) and also emotions to deal with (how will my baby cope without me? Can I remember how to do my job?).

It is completely normal to feel anxious, but with a little preparation and time to plan there are ways to reduce any stress you may be feeling.

How can I leave my baby?

After spending every waking moment with your baby up until this point, the prospect of being apart from them can be enormously distressing, even if you're looking forward to returning to your job.

One of the best ways to combat this is to feel comfortable with the care arrangements you have made for your child. The more confidence you have in how they're being looked after, the easier it will be for you to focus on work and adjust to being back.

Michelle, a marketing manager, returned to work when her daughter was 13 months old. She says even the preparations upset her. "Every daycare I drove away from I'd be crying. I felt sick at the thought of having to drop her off and leave her there for the day. It made me feel so guilty. I was thinking 'Am I making the right decision?' I had so much anxiety about it, but part of me knew that I wanted to go back to work because I love my job and it's a big part of my life.

"It got easier when I found a daycare I loved and was really happy with. We had the transition days and seeing her love the daycare environment did make me feel better about it."

Cat, a television producer, chose home-based care for her six-month-old son, Harlan, when she went back to work, part-time at first. Even with the reduced hours she says she had trouble adjusting. "I spent ages crying about whether he would have 'mother issues'. I asked myself 'Is he going to think his carer is his mum?' I was just in a mess about it. The first few weeks I was so distracted, wondering what he was doing. It wasn't until I realised he was okay that I started to let myself enjoy work again."

Kristin is in the last three months of her year-long maternity leave. She has enrolled her daughter in a local daycare and feels good about her upcoming return to work as a dietitian.

"Psychologically, I'm ready to go back to work. And I think it will be good for Abigail to go into daycare. Not only will it be good for her to socialise with other kids but she spends a huge amount of time just with me and I think that it will be good for her to have a bit of separation from me, and likewise."

If you're feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of returning to work and all that it brings, talk to other working mums about their experience and how they managed it. Talk to your partner too – not only is it important that you don't struggle with the emotion on your own, but there may be a way of arranging your respective work hours to find a solution. →

TIPS FOR SETTLING BACK IN

If you're anxious about dropping your child off to their carer, ask your partner to do it for the first couple of days. You can say goodbye to them at home without the stress of "leaving" them, before heading into work.

Get clothes and lunches ready the night before to reduce morning panic and rush.

Try to plan and shop for the week's dinners ahead of time.

The lists I need to do, but haven't yet... There's always tomorrow

My 9am coffee to start the day

Breastfeeding

Depending on how long you plan to breastfeed your baby, you could find yourself back in the office before they are fully weaned. This means you may need to feed or express in your workplace several times a day.

Under the Employment Relations Act, employers are required to provide appropriate facilities and breaks (unpaid, unless otherwise negotiated) for employees to breastfeed or express “as far as is reasonable and practicable.”

If you are going to need breastfeeding/expressing breaks and facilities then flag it with your employer when you confirm your return to work, or even earlier. You may be the first staff member to require such facilities and it could take a bit of organisation.

At the minimum you will need a clean, private space with a comfortable chair and a power point, if you need to plug in a pump. You may also need access to a fridge for storing expressed milk. (The Department of Labour notes that a toilet is not considered an appropriate place in which to breastfeed or express.)

There is information for both employers and employees as to the benefits of breastfeeding-friendly workplaces on the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment website. (See tips on breastfeeding and expressing at work on page 32.)

Making work work for you

Although you would have set a return date with your employer when applying for maternity leave, it is not uncommon for women to have mixed emotions about returning to work full-time, part-time or, indeed, returning at all. Whatever decision you make, it will doubtless take into account financial and emotional considerations.

Your views could also change completely, as Kristin discovered after becoming a mum to Abigail. “I truly thought I’d go back full-time because I really enjoy my job and am quite focused on my career,” she says. “I took a year off, but within eight weeks of having Abigail I decided that we would work it so I could be part-time. I have enjoyed being a mum probably more than I thought I would. I don’t want to be a stay-at-home mum but I enjoy the time that’s just the two of us so much that I can’t see me not having that.”

With two part-timers covering her maternity leave, Kristin knew it might be possible for her to go back part-time. Five months into her leave she raised the idea with her employer so they could start working through it.

There is increasing discussion now around mothers in the workplace, and the importance of flexible hours for companies who want to retain good staff. Under The Employment Relations Act, employees have a right to request flexible working arrangements and employers have a duty to give that request due consideration.

This can cater to many different scenarios, so if you feel it’s something that could be appropriate for your situation then talk to your employer about it sooner rather than later. There is a lot of useful information and examples for this online. (See the Back to Work box opposite.)

For Cat, the solution was to negotiate shorter hours for her full-time role (finishing at 4pm each day instead of 5pm) with the expectation from her employer that she would achieve the same outcomes. “It’s amazing how much more you can get done and how much faster you work when you’re thinking ‘I just need to do this so I can go’.”

She says the shorter work days made a huge difference to her. “That has been key to me feeling okay about being at work and so I still have a decent amount of time with Harlan. If I could have I would have stayed part-time, but I don’t think I could do my job part-time in the long term. My title and responsibilities would have to change and I don’t want that now. I’d worked so hard to get here.”

While you have the right to request flexible work hours from your employer, you also need to be prepared for them to say no. It simply may not be realistic for your role to be part-time or reduced hours. Going back to work full-time needn’t be the end of the world though – any change requires adjustment, so give your child and yourself time to settle into the new way of life. If it doesn’t feel right and you’re unhappy, you may wish to talk to your employer again, or reassess your situation.

Either way, being away from your child while you work can help focus you more on the time you do have together. “I try to switch off from work as soon as I get home,” says Michelle. “I know I have limited time with Olivia in the evening until she goes to bed, so I leave my job at the door and as soon as I walk into the house I’m ‘Mummy’. If I need to work in the weekend I do it while she’s having a nap; I also try not to check my work phone when I’m having time with her.”

Will I remember how to do my job?

It’s natural to feel slightly apprehensive about stepping back into your role after any period of time away, particularly if staff members, structures or systems have changed.

“You do doubt yourself a little bit as a mum, having had a year off,” says Michelle. “You’re thinking ‘Am I still going to have all that information in my head?’”

Cat says she found herself questioning her abilities too. “Will I be able to remember how to do my job, will I be as good at my job again? If I’m not, what does that mean?” She says her most important lesson was having faith in herself. “You’ve left work and done the hardest thing in the world by going off to learn how to be a mum; you can certainly come back to something you know how to do. You just have to give yourself a break and trust that it will come.”

BACK TO WORK

The official bits
If you are planning to return to work following your parental leave, you must write to your employer 21 days before your leave ends to confirm your intention to return to work.

An employee on parental leave is only entitled to return to the same job they had before parental leave in most circumstances. If you worked full-time before your maternity leave and wish to return part-time you will need to negotiate the change with your employer. An employment agreement may cover this type of situation before leave begins.

You have a right to request flexible working arrangements, and your employer has a duty to give it due consideration. You can find more information about these processes and the different scenarios of flexible work online at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment at www.dol.govt.nz

Kristin has kept in touch with the two people covering her year of maternity leave, so is aware of the changes in her workplace over that time.

“We’ve caught up for coffees throughout the year and they’ve emailed me about different bits and pieces so I’ve known what’s going on. They’re involving me, rather than me turning up on Monday and suddenly it’s my job.”

If you’ve been out of your role for a while, start by catching up on industry news and developments via websites, social media and LinkedIn a few weeks out from your return to the office.

You could also arrange an informal chat and catch-up with colleagues, or ask your boss for an update on any major changes before you start back. This can help you feel less overwhelmed and more in the loop on your first day back.

A new order

No matter what form your return takes, one thing is for sure: it will require a new routine, possibly both at home and work. There is the pressure of a new timetable combined with the stress of getting yourself, a baby (and any older children) ready and out the door so you can be at work on time.

Your attitudes towards time tend to become looser on maternity leave, as it’s difficult to be anywhere promptly when you’re wrangling an unpredictable baby. But while other mums in your coffee group understand 20 minutes of tardiness because of a ‘poooh-nami’ as you were putting the baby in the car, it’s harder when it’s a client or team meeting waiting for you at the office. And if you’re still getting up during the night to a baby who is wakeful or teething then getting a new routine in place to make life easier is essential.

“I had an hour and a half last night of Abigail being unsettled, but then I could sleep in till 7.45am,” says Kristin. “The thought of having that happen on a day that I then need to get up to go to work doesn’t fill me with a lot of joy!”

She says the logistics of their new workday routine is something she is yet to work out. “Abigail doesn’t have a set wake-up time, so it will be tricky knowing when she’s going to wake up, when she’s going to have breakfast, all of those things. It’ll need more organisation, like planning what we’re going to have for dinner and what she’s going to have for dinner. When you’re at home all day you have a bit more time to think about it.”

Your attitude to work could also change. While you may still love your job, you might be less inclined to work late regularly, or be the first to the pub for team drinks.

“I cherish every moment that I have with Olivia because I don’t see her every minute of the day like I did for 13 months,” says Michelle. “Out of work functions and after work drinks just don’t interest me any more, I just want to get home and see her.”

The decision of returning to work can be a difficult one, but offers personal and financial reward. →

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WORKING LIFE

It helps to remember what you enjoyed about your job before you left and that there are millions of working mums around the world making it work for their families too.

“It’s rewarding and it makes you get that piece of yourself back that I think lots of mums need,” says Michelle. “You can have a career and be successful and you can still be a brilliant mum too. When you can get into the routine and it works out it can be a great balance, once you find it.” ■



BREASTFEEDING/EXPRESSING AT WORK

Returning to work after maternity leave can seem both physically and emotionally daunting. Here are some tips from Philips AVENT for mums who want to continue to breastfeed when returning to work.

BEFORE YOU START

Start expressing at least four weeks before returning to work - this will allow you to get used to it and baby can adjust to a different feeding method. It will also give you time to build up at least one additional container of breast milk for storing in the freezer. (This will come in handy if you get delayed in traffic or a meeting at the end of the day). It is important that you are able to relax when expressing as stress can make it more difficult for your milk to come down. Also make sure you discuss your intention to use breast

milk with your child carer so they’re informed. The following questions are a great starting point when planning the logistics of expressing at work:

- 1) How will I express my breast milk?
- 2) How will I store my breast milk at work?
- 3) How will I transport my breast milk home?
- 4) If using a Breast Pump to express, how will I sterilise this at work in between each expression?

WORKPLACE

Know your rights, discuss your return with your

employer early on so that arrangements can be made. You are entitled to a private, quiet and clean space in which to express milk or feed your baby. Is there a fridge available to store your breast milk, or a microwave to sterilise your pump in between expressions?

Let your work colleagues know that you are continuing to breastfeed your baby upon returning to work, so they’re aware you will need to go at certain times of the day to express/feed. (And so they aren’t alarmed at the bottles of milk in the fridge).

Find advice for preparing to breastfeed/express at work on the Ministry of Health website at www.health.govt.nz Search ‘breastfeeding at work’. For more advice on your rights and how to discuss breastfeeding with your employer visit Breastfeeding Friendly Workplaces online at www.bfw.org.nz

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