

OUT OF



office

Preparing for maternity leave involves planning, paperwork, and, as VICTORIA WELLS explains, some significant emotional adjustments too

have a letter in amongst all my mementoes of pregnancy. It is from my doctor and states simply: “This letter is to certify that Victoria Wells is pregnant. Her baby is due on or around August 20, 2012.”

That’s it. No gushing words of excitement around what a joyous time it is for me. But that letter sums up a black and white truth for working women: there are aspects of preparing for motherhood that, although less exciting than choosing little newborn outfits, are just as crucial. Preparing for maternity leave is one of them and it’s something that needs practical and emotional consideration.

The letter was intended for my employer, so he and I could begin the paperwork trail around applying for time off to have my baby and registering for paid parental leave, a step around 26,000 expectant mothers take each year.

But aside from the official bits there is also the reality of leaving the workforce for up to 12 months. For many women, this could be the first significant break they have ever had in their working lives – and for those who have spent years building a career the prospect of stepping away from that can be a terrifying one, no matter how much they’re looking forward to the arrival of their new baby.

Your feelings about going on maternity leave will depend greatly on what kind of work you do, whether you enjoy it and how long you’re planning to take off with your baby. It may be that you can’t wait to stop work to focus entirely on being a mum, or perhaps the thought of not knowing what’s going on back at the office brings you out in a cold sweat. Here are some of the things you may find yourself dealing with.

Who will do my job?

It’s common for businesses to employ someone to cover the job of a staff member who takes maternity leave, unless their role can be covered internally. Depending on the type of industry you’re in and the size of the company, you could be involved with and possibly even given responsibility for, finding the person to cover your role while you’re on maternity leave.

It may be that you’re happy to pass the responsibility for your role on, knowing that internal systems will keep everything running smoothly. If your job is a big part of your life you may find it difficult to imagine handing its daily workings over to someone else, and therefore have a more vested interest in ensuring you have confidence in your cover to ensure all goes smoothly while you’re away.

For many women, this is a time of mixed emotions coupled with the fact that it usually all comes to a head towards the end of your pregnancy when you’re tired, often sore and probably can’t wait to get out from behind your desk to put your feet up.

Siobhan, a marketing manager, was put in charge of working out how her nine months of maternity leave would be covered and then finding the person for the role. Her plan to finish work six weeks before her due date soon evaporated.

“The recruitment process was longer than they’d expected. My six weeks became four and then it became two. If I did my time again I’d definitely say ‘I am finishing one month before I’m having this baby, and I don’t care if it’s not sorted because you know what? It’s not my responsibility.’”

Cat, who works in television production, found out she was pregnant just six months into a promotion. “I was terrified. It was such a good opportunity for me to spend the next two years working really hard to get ahead and then bang, I was pregnant. I realised I had to do the best I could in the time I had and then get somebody I trusted to do the job. At the time I was wondering ‘Are they going to come in and change everything?’ It’s that flip thing: you’re terrified about leaving and then you’re terrified about coming back!”

Whether you’re involved in the hiring or not, if you’re planning on returning to your role then it’s in your best interests to ensure the person overseeing it during your absence has all the information they require to do a good job.

- Allow enough time before you finish to complete a comprehensive hand over. It pays to finalise maternity cover details well before your due date in case your baby arrives early.
- If there are specific projects that can be parked until you return then ensure that’s made clear.
- Make sure the contact details of the maternity cover person are communicated within your workplace and to any external contacts who will need to deal with them.

Should I stay in touch?

Decide how much, if at all, you need to stay in touch with work while you’re on maternity leave. It might feel like the place will fall apart without you, but it’s also important to give yourself some uninterrupted time in those first weeks to get into the swing of life with a newborn and all it involves.

The problem with trying to decide on any potential work contact while you’re away is that you won’t know how you really feel until the baby arrives and you’re in the thick of it. All the women I spoke to for this article were in agreement that at least the first six weeks are crucial for letting your body recover from the birth, adjusting to broken sleep, bonding with the baby and getting the hang of breast-feeding.

“I really struggled with feeding to start with,” says Cat. “It was nine weeks until I actually started to enjoy feeding him, so that whole time I felt like I spent my life on the couch trying to get him to latch, trying →

TAKE NOTE

FIVE TIPS ON STAYING IN TOUCH

1 Sign up to company updates/work e-newsletters with your personal email address

2 Ask to be included in any major meetings where appropriate (depending on your workplace you should expect this to be without your baby; arrange care or if that’s not possible talk to your employer about getting a debrief later from them or from colleagues)

3 Ask to be kept abreast of company developments such as restructures, staff changes, new computer systems

4 Keep in touch with industry happenings/events through LinkedIn, social media or industry websites

5 Schedule in a monthly coffee catch-up with colleagues.



to get him to feed properly, and every single day was the same. And I remember thinking 'I'd rather be working than doing this.' And then it all clicks and everything changes. I think it took until I was successfully feeding for me to really bond with him."

Siobhan says she cut herself off from her office for six weeks. "I said 'Please don't ring or contact me... and at the end of that six weeks I'll let you know how I'm going.'" She also had her work emails diverted to the person overseeing her role. "I didn't get any incoming emails at all, but I did try to keep across industry stuff, more out of interest as opposed to duty."

Kate, an events and marketing manager, took four months off work and kept in touch with her office by email throughout her maternity leave. "I was kept up to date with what was happening in the office...I think it did make me feel better about going back the first time." Now on leave with her second baby, she has chosen to stay in touch again, popping in for meetings or social events. "When I do go in I remember what it's all about and that I do really enjoy my job. The first time around I probably wasn't quite ready to go back, whereas this time I know what it's like and realise it's actually quite good [for me] to have that balance between being a mum and having my work and my own time...and my own money!"

Despite Cat's early concerns about stepping away from her role, she soon stopped worrying about what was going on back at the office, knowing they could contact her if they needed to. "I thought I would have stayed in touch with work much more than I did. But I think once you're into being busy with your baby then your focus does just become that. It certainly did for me at that point."

This isn't what I imagined

Some of the feelings that can surface after stepping away from your career to care for a baby are loss of identity, loss of control and loneliness. Often, the significance of the change won't hit you until a couple of months in when you feel you're getting the hang of the new baby challenge but then find yourself sitting at home with a sleeping baby and yet another pile of washing in front of you. It can start to seem a little like groundhog day.

Something often not discussed is how lonely motherhood can be in the early days. It's a big transition from an office environment where chatting with colleagues over the coffee machine or across desks is part of your daily routine, to being in your house with a baby who sleeps up to 16 hours a day.

Rachel, a theatre nurse, says she struggled with feelings of isolation during her year of maternity leave. "We had our coffee group and it was great to meet up

PARENTAL LEAVE 101

* If you have been with the same employer or self-employed continuously for at least six months you are entitled to 14 weeks paid parental leave. (This will increase to 16 weeks from April 2015, and to 18 weeks in April 2016.) The maximum rate as at July 1, 2014 was \$504.10 per week before tax.

* If you have at least 12 months continuous service with your employer you are also entitled to up to 52 weeks of employment-protected unpaid parental leave. (Any paid parental leave taken is included within this period).

* There are also leave provisions for spouses/partners.

There are requirements around applying for paid parental leave and notifying your employer of your intention to take leave and for how long. You can find more information about what you need to do and what your rights are on the websites for the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (www.dol.govt.nz) and Inland Revenue (www.ird.govt.nz).

with friends too – but eventually everyone drifts back to work and their own lives and you're sort of stuck at home. It took a while for me to adjust...especially when my husband was back to work and he got to hang out with adults and you're just with the baby."

There's also a huge adjustment to be made in your own expectations around what you can achieve. If you're in a job that requires high levels of efficiency and productivity, then looking after a newborn is going to be very different.

After a career as a teacher, which requires lots of planning and a day run to strict timetables, Juliet says the unpredictability of her new life at home with the baby was tricky. "I loved being on maternity leave but I did have that feeling of a lack of control because I think I am quite a control freak. To have my whole life revolve around someone else and to not even know how long you would have in a certain block of time...I did find that quite difficult."

"From a work perspective of being in control, I went to suddenly not being in control of anything," says Jo, who works in advertising. "I'm also used to having clear definitions of what success looks like and career progression, which just changes totally. Going from being a highly efficient and productive person to less so is a big change."

Lessons learned

"Don't have too many expectations of what maternity leave will be like," says Rachel. "It probably won't turn out like you think."

Wise words indeed, when you consider how much of an upheaval having a baby is in the first place, let alone the compounded effects of leaving your job. I

IT'S A BIG TRANSITION FROM AN OFFICE, WHERE CHATTING WITH COLLEAGUES OVER THE COFFEE MACHINE OR ACROSS DESKS IS PART OF YOUR DAILY ROUTINE, TO BEING IN YOUR HOUSE WITH A BABY WHO SLEEPS UP TO 16 HOURS A DAY.



would be the first to confess to picturing maternity leave as a time of walks in the park and gentle play with my baby, coffee dates and time to run the sort of household that always knows what's for dinner and never runs out of toothpaste. While there were of course wonderful moments with my little boy, there were also nights of screaming and re-settling, followed by some days of feeling too tired to do anything and then feeling guilty about it, and random fits of crying (me, not the baby). I had to adjust my expectations.

"I was really looking forward to maternity leave," says Siobhan. "I thought it was going to be like this long holiday where I could be my own person and I could meet friends for coffee... I don't think I'd factored in the baby bit." She recalls being in tears one morning, telling her mother she had wished for her old life back. "I felt really guilty, but I said 'Honestly Mum, I just wish I had my old life where I went to bed and I went to sleep and I wasn't sitting there at 4am trying to get the baby back to sleep.' She just gave me a hug and said 'Welcome to being a mum!'"

It's completely normal to feel emotional or overwhelmed at times, but if at any point you feel like you're not coping and the low feelings are long-lasting then talk to your Plunket nurse, your GP or a friend. The 'baby blues' are common in the first couple of weeks after the baby is born while your hormones pull themselves together again. But adapting to being home with an unpredictable newborn when you're still learning to be a mum can be a big change if you're accustomed to a working life where you know exactly what's going on and are confident in your abilities to do a good job.

"I think motherhood is a really good lesson in just letting stuff go," says Siobhan. "Especially when you're a career woman and you've spent the first part of your life focused on achieving, and then all of a sudden this little person comes into your life and just throws it into complete disarray."

At work, you can prepare for new situations or projects by researching and gathering information. One of the amazing things about parenthood is that no matter how much research you do, until that little bundle of joy arrives you have no idea how it's all going to go. It's only natural to feel out of your depth, which in turn can knock your confidence, so be prepared to feel unprepared and know that it's okay.

"As much as you know, rationally, that it's going to be a huge transition and you've done the research and the reading and talked to the people who have done



it before...having a teeny baby in your home...it was hard work," says Jo.

No matter how you decide to organise your maternity leave or how long you take, the most important thing to remember is that it's an incredibly special time for you and your baby to get to know each other and build your relationship. Becoming a mum is a job you'll have for the rest of your life and like any career it brings its own joys and challenges.

"I knew much of my identity was tied to my work. Now, it's a new identity for me as a mum," says Jo, "but it's amazing and particularly when the first smiles come, it makes it all worthwhile." ■

WATCH THIS SPACE

The New Zealand government has recognised that the current Parental Leave Act fails to promote attachment to work or to encourage employees to maintain skills. In mid-2014 it sought feedback on introducing 'Keeping in Touch Days'. These 'KIT' days are used in the UK and Australia and allow employees to work up to 10 agreed paid days during the entirety of their maternity leave (both the paid and extended portions) in order to stay in touch with their workplace. The New Zealand proposal is for five days, to be worked within the statutory maternity leave period (ie the first 14 weeks under current law, which will extend to 18 weeks by April 2016) but not within the first month of the baby's birth.

These days would not affect paid parental leave entitlements. Submissions will be published on the website of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment at www.mbie.govt.nz

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