

# Post-maternity jitters?

Resuming work after your maternity leave can be nerve-wracking. We give you a perspective that could help you prepare and avoid potential problems...

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**I**s it time to get back from your maternity leave? Do you have butterflies in your stomach worrying about the numerous things that could go wrong? Are you excited or nervous to get back to work? Worried whether your little one will cope well in your absence? Anxious about settling down in a new routine at work? Welcome to the club!

"Oh! I will never forget the day I was back at work from my maternity leave," chuckles Sumathi, IT professional and mum to a 10-year-old. "I was feeling so confused and even pressed the wrong number in the lift, suddenly unable to remember which floor my office was on! Then, when I got to my desk, I was cracking my brain hard to remember my system's password. Well, I definitely felt like a lost puppy," she admits.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS

As a new mum, you may need some time to readjust to a lot of minute things like these. But, sometimes it need not just be the little things. "When I left for my delivery, I was managing a team of 10 and when I returned, I found that someone else was managing my team now because I had been away for six months. My boss told me that I should scout for new roles and opportunities and lined up meetings for me with other teams. Very soon, I was working with a completely new set of people and in a new domain," shares Sheetal Agarwal, a research analyst.

Typically, it's advisable to contact your boss a couple of weeks before your return and have a discussion. This can help avoid unnecessary surprises and it also gives you a chance to set expectations about your situation. Sometimes, you may choose to return part-time for the first few weeks and then slowly settle into a regular routine. Else, you may choose to join full-time but may opt for a couple of breaks during the day to go home and nurse your child. These discussions should happen before your first day back, so both you and your boss are clear with what to expect of each other.

## PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

In addition to lifestyle changes at home, a working mother has to deal with a dynamic environment at work. Most importantly, there is the perennial challenge of shuttling between work and home. "Your work hours change and you are unable to put in crazy hours as before. Sometimes, this impacts productivity, but many a times it also enforces discipline – I take fewer breaks and when I am at work, I focus without getting distracted by phone calls or checking emails," shares Sheetal. "This also meant my informal interactions with the team became limited and, initially, it created a sort of rigidity between us. They were still getting used to the new me, who was always in a hurry. It took time for things to iron out," she adds.

A transparent conversation with the boss and also with your team helps invariably.

It avoids any confusions or assumptions made on your behalf. Kala, a marketing consultant, explains, "My boss just assumed that post my delivery, I would not be available for travelling assignments and started allocating projects that did not involve travel. I began to feel that I was being sidelined from important projects, whereas he thought he was being considerate to my situation. When I confronted him later and he explained, I let him know that my support system ensures that I can travel. It was something that could have been easily avoided by having an open dialogue."

Another constant point of conflict is the work hours. Another mum Priya says, "My little one's daycare center used to close at seven pm every day, which meant that, come what may, I needed to go to pick up my child then. I would continue working after putting my child to sleep. Most of the days it worked, but sometimes, there would be a nagging issue at work and while everyone was firefighting the problem, I would have to run to pick up the child. It can be awkward, but you just need to find a way deal with the perceptions and problems."

## THE TUG-OF-WAR AND THE GUILT FACTOR

Typically, around the time a woman has a child, she has also progressed into a senior role at work. This often means you have increased responsibilities at work



and at home and women get loaded with guilt. A human resource professional shares, "Often, I have cases where women employees walk up to me after a few months of being back from maternity leave and asking for part-time opportunities or to get moved into teams where the work load is lighter. They are forced to take tough decisions due to a combination of factors."

Kavitha, who has been a working mother for 13 years, shares, "While it can be a bit overwhelming initially, especially during times when your child falls sick or when the workload gets heavy, I have gotten used to it now. I realise that there is no use feeling guilty. It's not just women or mums, who have these constraints – some people have elder care responsibilities or other personal issues that warrant them to focus more at home. So, the moment I told myself, this is the way of life, my confidence also got projected at work."

#### **JUST NOT HARD-WORK, SMART-WORK!**

Kavitha also suggests, "The way I worked it out was to slow down for a few years when I felt it was challenging and to step it up when I was more settled. Even today, I always set the expectations clearly with all my stakeholders, about what I can do and by when. Importantly, I try to leave my personal problems at home when I come to work so I can add value in whatever I am working on. If you are bringing something special to the table, people will be willing to be flexible with you when you need it." She further stresses, "Women also need to be careful to manage perceptions because it should not appear like you are dumping your work on the rest of your team or that you have developed a callous attitude towards work. Ultimately, it's a job that you are getting paid for, so you need to be professional at the work place."

#### **MENTORING AND TRAINING**

Sometimes, all the conversations and smart work do not help when you end up with a team or a boss who cannot empathise with you. This is where intervention and a strong message from senior management is needed. Corporates are actively organising sensitivity trainings for employees to understand the challenges faced by new mothers. There are also buddy and mentoring forums where mothers can network with and coach each other. A senior-junior pairing works effectively

when veterans can share their know-how with newbies. New dad Vaibhav adds with a smile, "It's not just the new mothers, but as a new dad, I have my own set of challenges as well. With many sleepless nights comforting the crying baby, it hasn't been an easy phase. I have recommended that the trainings should also address the concerns of fathers."

The transition to work after giving birth to a baby may not be smooth, but with a little pro-active planning and ploughing through with a calm head, you could succeed in making a molehill out of a mountain. **M&B**

