

The New 'You': Modern Mums

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Becoming a mum for the first time is a time of celebration for most women. It is also a time of many changes. This fact sheet explores the more challenging aspects of being a modern mum. Often knowing that you are not alone is an important step toward feeling good about yourself. While everyone's experience is unique there are common themes for women today as they embark on that amazing journey – motherhood.



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Did you know?

Did you know that many women feel reluctant to speak about the challenges of motherhood? This is despite the fact that parenthood, especially new motherhood, is commonly accepted as being demanding for most. It is also despite evidence that 16% of women in developed countries experience postnatal depression¹ and an estimated 30-80% of women experience some level of emotional disturbance post natally.²

So why do so many women prefer a 'grin and bear it' approach?

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons is stigma.³ We want to look like we are coping and we can feel like a failure if we are not. Motherhood is supposed to be a happy occasion right? Well it certainly can be but there are many legitimate reasons why it can be stressful too.

Women today not only have to deal with birthing and baby care but also a social context that has changed dramatically in the last few decades. Becoming a mother is more complex now.

For a start new mothers are older now than before. In the 1980's most women had their first child in their early 20's but now most are in their early 30's.⁴ Many women use this time to pursue career and lifestyle goals. However it is easy to underestimate the sense of loss that can occur when motherhood interrupts or ends activities that were relied on for sustenance or self-esteem.

Secondly, while it is common now for women to raise a family alongside paid work, the ideals of

motherhood are often at odds with ideals about independence and personal success. The fall-out from this inner conflict is often a prevailing sense of guilt and failure linked to unrealistic expectations about being a 'good mother' and having the 'perfect baby'.⁵ The current emphasis on mother and baby interactions can add to this internal pressure. If all the attention is focussed on the parenting role then it is harder for women to speak about their needs if it does not relate to their baby.

Finally, our increasingly individualistic culture can see the individual as the problem before looking at other causes. Individualism can also drive a wedge between mothers and their need for support. Self-reliance can be a double edged sword.

Changes inside and out

There are a myriad of changes a woman can experience once becoming a mother: physical, emotional, financial, psychological, lifestyle, and social. Some of these changes can be observed and others cannot. Some of these changes are pleasant and others are not. Some of these changes come and go while others remain and become a defining characteristic of the 'new you'.

(continued on page 2...)

1. Beyondblue, (2011); Halbreich & Karkan (doi:10.1016/j.jad.2005.12.051)

2. McMahon, Barnett, Kowalenko, & Tennet (2006); Nicolson (1998); O'Hara (1997); Priest & Barnett (2008); Scott, Brady, & Glynn (2000)

3. Brown, Lumley, Small, & Astbury (1994); Hammarburg (2007); Maushart (1997); Thurer 1994); Williamson (2005)

4. AIFS, 'Families then and now: 1980-2010' (2010)

5. Buttrose and Adams (2005); Brown, Lumley, Small, & Astbury (1994); Hays (1996); Lupton (2000); Maushart (1997); Thurer 1994)

Physical & Physiological

In Sue Fabisch's *Motherhood the Musical* the songs *I Leak*, and *How Great They Were* clearly struck a chord when I was a part of the audience! They speak of how a woman can lament the changes to her body -inside and out- once she has children.

Of course hormonal changes play a part though these are often temporary. It's also helpful not to underestimate the effects of sleep deprivation on general functioning. While it's true that you may learn to survive on a lot less sleep, the accumulative effect can reduce your resilience to stress.

Emotional

Author and researcher Dr Wendy LeBlanc says that often there is a big gap between expectation and experience for new mothers today. Even feeling more emotionally attached to your baby, and having a greater concern for children generally, can produce a sense of confusion about who is this 'new you'.

Financial

The introduction of paid maternity leave in Australia takes the pressure off women to return to work after having a baby. However, the reality is that having a baby and raising children makes life more costly. Women, especially, can feel in constant conflict about how much to engage in paid work and how much or how long to stay at home.

Despite decades of feminism, most women still show a stronger desire than men do to stay at home when their children are young. If a woman was the main wage earner before having children, then this desire can cause a lot of unrest or financial strain.

Psychological

Dr Joan Garvan says that one of the biggest challenges facing modern mums is working through identity issues. She says that for women today there are not only changes in how women see themselves once becoming a mother, but that our society does not give due recognition to these issues if they are not directly related to parenting.



This 'new you' can eventually be like a butterfly that is a more beautiful version of the 'old you', but the process of this transformation can be very unsettling for many women.

Researchers agree that new motherhood can create internal conflict as women ask themselves, "Who am I now?"⁶ This process often involves a reassessment of life's priorities on a scale that was not anticipated. This is especially true for career orientated women.

Lifestyle and Social

The sheer volume of work involved in caring for a new baby or young child can be immense and can take most modern women by surprise. For older mums or those who have gone through IVF this change in lifestyle, and the associated loss of independence and control, can come as a shock.⁷

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There can be many relationship changes too, not least with the woman's partner. Tensions are common in negotiating 'who does what' and women typically are less interested in sex.⁸

For most women the intense love they have for their children and the joy they feel at being a mother remains unquestioned. But for many there are tensions and challenges that place a shadow on the experience of new motherhood and beyond.

I believe that the more women are encouraged to speak up and work through these challenges, the less likely they are to develop clinical indications of depression and anxiety. And the more they are likely to feel good about themselves and enjoy one of the most important roles in life - being a mother.

6. Garvin (2010); Hays (1996); LeBlanc (1999); Nicolson (1999)

7. Bedos (2007); Brown, Lumley, Small, Astbury (1994); Hammarburg (2007); Lewis & Nicolson (1998); Lupton (2000); Maushart (1997)

8. Arndt (2011); Garvin (2010); Human Rights & EO Commission (2007)

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