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Leaving Work to Be an At-Home Mom

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Sometimes, when I'm out driving, the New York skyline comes into view, and, for a few seconds, I'll think about work. Rather, my former work. And my former co-workers. For a moment, I'll wonder what they're all up to. And then I think about how I used to be running around Manhattan as a writer for a men's fashion paper, going from the office to showrooms to lunch dates, then back to the office.

Then...then I look in the rearview mirror and see my 20-month-old daughter sitting in her car seat, kicking her feet to the music on the radio.

It's at times like this when I still experience the simultaneous longing for being an independent working woman and happiness of being an at-home mom. And although I'm more than settled in my new role, it's been a long road getting here. In the early months following my daughter's birth, none of the other moms I knew talked about missing work or, if they did, it was quickly followed by how happy they were at home. And I couldn't help thinking: what's my problem?

"I think it's kind of an undiscussed, dirty little secret of being an at-home mom," said Andrea Terry of Hillsdale. She is a founding member and former leader of the Bergen County chapter of Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge (FEMALE), a national organization based in Illinois.

A CRASH COURSE IN RESENTMENT

And what is the problem exactly? Well, after years of working to achieve a certain success in their jobs, women who stay at home sometimes feel resentful that their days revolve around loads of laundry, piles of dishes, constant messes and dirty diapers. Whereas they were formerly respected professionals with good salaries, now there's no pay, they're home alone a lot, and they feel much of society, including, unfortunately, many women, doesn't appreciate the work involved in being home with a child every day. Their lives have changed completely, and, for some women, it's hard to get accustomed to.

Patricia Shepherd, a licensed clinical social worker at the

Institute for Behavioral Health Services at Hackensack University Medical Center, said she sees women who come in with anxiety or depression about some aspect of their lives, then discover they're in a quandary about their new role as a mother.

"I find women saying, 'I should be enjoying myself a lot more,' and 'Why do I want to go back to work? Does this mean I'm a poor mother and I lack a maternal instinct?'" Shepherd continued. "I think the longer women are professionals, the more they define themselves by what they do. So when they give that up, either temporarily or permanently, it's a major loss of how they view themselves. You go through a learning process, learning to enjoy yourself as a mother."

Cheryl Spadaro of Rutherford, the mother of two-year-old Nicolas, spent years commuting into Manhattan as a designer of men's outerwear. Her last position was as vice-president of leather design for the company that made Guess? leathers for men.

She said that, for the nine months she was pregnant, the company assured her it would be flexible about her work schedule once the baby was born. She planned to work three days a week in the city, one day at home, and take one day off. However, after Nicolas was born, the company put pressure on her to get a full-time caretaker.

"When I grew up, nobody I knew had a nanny," Spadaro said. "In my heart I guess I didn't really want to find one, so I didn't look that hard. Then [the company] made the decision for me because it became clear they would not be flexible, so they let me go. I was very nervous about being home and not working. I'd like to say my son was the most important thing and everything else paled in comparison. But I still looked for work, whether it was part-time or freelance. Because I'd worked for so long and was good at that. Staying home and taking care of the baby was so completely different, I felt I didn't always know what I was doing."

DEFINED BY YOUR WORK

This is a very common feeling, according to Virginia Wasserman, clinical supervisor at the Institute for Behavioral Health Services. "People struggle because they're given this new role as a mother," she said. "And while they're excited, there's also a scariness that occurs as far as what they're able to give the baby. At the same time, and I'm remembering from when I had little kids and I, too, defined myself by my work, you sometimes ask, 'Who am I?' Nobody knows that important professional person you were. But these women need to remind themselves that they've become an important mother person."

Lorraine Seagriff of Rutherford is the mother of 22-month-old Victoria. Prior to leaving her job, she worked at Sony Music in Manhattan as an executive in A&R (artists and repertoire) administration. She said even though she was very happy being home with her daughter, she periodically ran into people who made the work of at-home mothers seem less than worthwhile.

"They would make it seem like it wasn't a career," she explained. "From the beginning, when I talked to certain people about being home with Victoria, even though I felt great about doing it, they made me feel like I wasn't doing all I could do. And it made me feel bad even though I knew it was silly to feel that way."

There is a strong emphasis in our society on maintaining a professional role in society, Shepherd acknowledged, although she believes the sands might be shifting again, making it less of a social stigma to be an at-home mother.

"I think it's all part of the struggle," she said. "There's the guilt after you've been home during maternity leave and then you have to tear yourself away, wondering if you're being a good mother. Then if you stay home, you wonder about your obligation to yourself, and whether you're a quote 'productive member of society.'"

FEMALE's Terry said that outside social pressure, especially from other women, only exacerbates the problem. "Women should support each other's choices, whatever makes sense for each individual," she said. "Still, I find the women in our group have trouble expressing themselves because they don't have a job title. One woman said she says, 'I'm raising the next generation,' and another said, 'I work--it's not paid work, but it should be.' You have to project that you're proud of your job. It's an immensely important one."

Staying at home with a baby can also be very isolating, something new moms may not fully realize until they're actually around the house seven days a week. Shepherd, who now works three days a week, recalled what it was like when she had her baby in October 1995.

"I was off work until February," she said. "But I couldn't get together with my friends because all my friends worked. And we couldn't go to the park and meet other moms because it was the middle of winter. And so that's another thing you're giving up-- your circle of friends."

THE LONELINESS OF NEW MOTHERHOOD

In fact, said FEMALE's Terry, isolation is cited as one of the major causes of blues for its members, which include bankers,

lawyers, and Ph.D.'s. In the beginning, she said, new moms get caught up caring for the baby, dealing with sleep deprivation and just trying to cope. But once they get a system down, they are often left yearning for company. "If you don't see anybody else during the daily stroller ride, it gets lonely," she said.

So what's the answer? How do you keep from resenting your child's needs, while taking care of your own? Many believe that women who formerly worked outside the home do best when they begin to manage their lives like they did their jobs.

Terry said members of FEMALE often reported that it took 6-8 months of being home with the baby before they came out of their shells and found other people in their situations. Besides joining a group like FEMALE, where women can involve themselves in adult exchanges, Terry suggests enrolling your child in activity classes like Gymboree, forming a playgroup or making regular trips to the park.

For Spadaro, who spent her career traveling overseas, placing million-dollar orders and meeting tight deadlines, joining an activity class that met once a week made all the difference.

"That was a turning point for me," said Spadaro. "He was only four months old, and I felt so bad about being home. But the fact that I got out and saw other mothers, even if I didn't talk to them that much, made all the difference. They were in my situation where they had been professionals, and they weren't all really young. The more I went, the better it was."

Seagriff agreed. "I think you really have to meet people you have more in common with," she said. "It's not as intense as the work atmosphere, but the people you meet at Gymboree and in the neighborhood and in the park all make you feel better."

Seagriff, who is expecting her second child in March, said staying home with the baby was a thrilling prospect, even though it meant she would leave her job of nine years at Sony, where she had the enviable job of working with musicians, managers and producers.

"I couldn't wait to have the baby," she said. "I knew I wasn't going back to work. I felt having kids would be the most important thing that I would do in my life. I wanted to be there full-time for it, not just for the responsibility, but because I didn't want to miss out on all the things that happen."

Seagriff admitted, though, that the hardest adjustment to staying home has been missing the communication she had with people she worked with, either in the office or over the phone. "Now my conversation is very limited throughout the day," she said. "It's Winnie the Pooh this and Snow White that."

Seagriff also joined a Gymboree class, in addition to making regular trips to the park and mall. And she also did something else for herself: she took a sewing class and has actually found time to make a few items.

"The adjustment is actually easier than I thought it would be," she said. "I thought I would miss work and people more, but I prefer this lifestyle. Sometimes I think I don't ever want to go back to work. I miss being in New York a little bit, but I can't imagine myself being back on the bus and doing the commute-- waiting for the bus, hoping to get a seat on the bus. I can do without that."

Spadaro said now that Nicolas is two, they're entering a new stage, and things are getting easier. She's much more comfortable being home, and she works out her creative side through projects around the house, whether it's making Halloween costumes, wallpapering her kitchen or sewing new curtains for the living room.

"I'm like a professional mother," she said. "Somebody once said to me, 'You worked all those years and were good at that. Now this is your new career.'"

PROBLEMS TO WATCH FOR

Virginia Wasserman, clinical supervisor at the Institute for Behavioral Health Services at Hackensack University Medical Center, said women need to be careful not to chalk up a serious depression to having trouble adjusting to being home with a baby.

Symptoms of serious depression include:

- *eating a lot or not eating at all
- *sleeping a lot or not being able to sleep at all
- *a lack of interest in anything
- *getting no pleasure at all out of caring for the baby
- *crying a lot
- *not caring for yourself.

If you're experiencing any of the above symptoms, Wasserman suggests that you talk to a doctor or professional counselor.

Catherine Schetting Salfino of Rutherford, mother of 20-month-old Cara, is a freelance writer.

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