

## Returning to work after pregnancy and the struggles that come with it

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10 October is World Mental Health Day and each year I have always worked on some kind of campaign or initiative to raise awareness of the importance of one's mental health and wellbeing. But this year I have used it instead as a goal, set to share that I have been struggling with postnatal depression and that the best way to overcome it is to admit it and face it.

Depression is a common mental disorder and according to WHO, more than 300 million people of all ages suffer from it globally, and that it is a leading cause of disability worldwide. Yet what scared me the most is the fact that it is categorized as a mental disorder and a disability. I think it's because of this that many people deny to themselves that have gone or are going through some form of depression. This brings me to my story.

According to WHO, there are three common forms of postpartum affective illness: the blues (baby blues, maternity blues), postpartum (or postnatal) depression, and puerperal (postpartum or postnatal) psychosis. I had received leaflets, advice from medical professionals, skim-read articles recommended to me with little interest because quite frankly, I never ever thought it would happen to me. But it did.

In May 2019, my partner and I welcomed our baby boy into this world. He was a week late and weighed 9.9lbs, nearly 4.5kg! I was very glad to have him by the emergency caesarian section which was not what we had planned in our birth plan, so I never even read up about it. But within hours after he was born, my partner whose title was Company Secretary at the time was called away by his company for a General Meeting in another country. So I spent the first week of having a baby by myself, several days of which in the hospital recovering from surgery and with my beautiful crying baby next to me. To make matters worse, I was unable to produce breastmilk and it took multiple observations, assessments by the hospital staff to finally admit that there was an issue and for them to give me formula milk to feed my baby. Because he was born so big and healthy, it took a few weeks for the midwives to really take this problem seriously, and by this time, his weight had dropped dangerously, and we were admitted to A&E (Accident & Emergency). I felt like such a failure, having assumed the baby was being fed when in fact, he was getting nothing, and all his crying finally made sense to me.

Looking back, I think I never gave myself a chance to process what happened and I just kept it all in.

The feelings of helplessness, failure as a mother, and anger towards my partner were bottled up as I used work and taking care of the baby to fill up all my time. But then I needed to relocate back to Hong Kong and to move in with my parents-in-law and the cracks quickly appeared. I started feeling anxious, panicked about returning to work and what to do about the baby when I'm working. I felt overloaded by advice, demands, comments, and requests to meet the baby by family and friends, all wanting to impart their knowledge and expertise and to see the baby. I started to feel overwhelmed and exhausted with everything and began letting it out on my partner and those close around me. The first time I left the baby home and went to the office, I felt so guilty that I secretly burst into tears whilst cuddling him, hiding in the bedroom away from the parents-in-law.

Then, on a family weekend break where my mother kindly took the baby for the night, I finally broke down completely whilst trying to talk about parenting with my partner. We spent the night opening up and finally communicating with each other. I must have used an entire box of tissues crying.

The following week, I apologized to my colleagues for not being responsive, for dropping the ball on things and I had a renewed vigor back at work. I also started to let my parents-in-law spend time with the baby whilst I took meetings and did work at home which helped me a lot.

I'm not out of the woods yet as I do still have moments when the baby is crying or when I see his skin inflamed by eczema that makes me still feel helpless and guilty that I do not have all the answers and am not in control. But acknowledging that I will not have all the answers, that I will never be in complete control of my life ever again, helps me to grow into this new life as a mother, moreover, a working mother.



For the women out there, that are pregnant or recently new mothers like myself, I have some advice for you.

- Don't let taking care of the baby consume you. It's easy to forget about your own self-care so do make time for yourself be it a massage, facial, or manicure.
- Remember your own identity – I nearly lost myself by being too consumed with taking care of the baby. Remind yourself of your life and career before baby and work out your plan to Integrate new motherhood with all this.
- Be willing to let go – This refers to when we have to go to work and leave the baby behind. We can do this and it does not make us bad mothers!
- Leverage your support network – I must have joined a million baby/mother/parenting groups!
- Work out with your manager and team, a plan to ease back into work:

- Try to phase your return back.
- Leverage work from home and flexible work options.
- Don't take on too much too soon – new mother commitments will eat into your days. The first 6 months if you are breastfeeding and/or pumping milk, this will take out anywhere from 3 to 5 hours of your day!
- Plan your work schedule incorporating new parent duties – For example, for us, baby's bath time and bed time is around 8 pm so I try to avoid taking calls or attending meetings during this time.

Sharing my story and this article has been a cathartic experience. My previous article was all about empowerment and climbing the career ladder, so I have struggled to be vulnerable and to admit that I've not been ok but It's ok to not be ok. We are all going to face struggles and difficult periods at some point in our lives.

On World Mental Health Day this year, reach out to a family member, friend, or colleague to see if they are ok. Commit to one change in your working or management method that will help improve wellbeing. Most importantly, reflect on your own mental wellbeing and carve out some "me" time for yourself.



The post "Returning to work after pregnancy and the struggles that come with it" was first published by Florence Sai Wing Chan here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/returning-work-after-pregnancy-struggles-come-florence-sai-wing-chan/>

## About Florence Sai Wing Chan

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<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/returning-to-work-after-pregnancy-and-the-struggles-that-come-with-it>