

# SUPPORT – THE UNTOLD TRUTH

Is it just me or is there a list for everything these days? So, here's my attempt at one — the top five things they REALLY should have told you about becoming a working mum.

**1**

**That, miraculously, you'll be able to function and think with less than four hours of sleep a night;**

**2**

**Working mum's guilt — it's a reality;**

**3**

**You'll love your child like you've never loved anything before. But you'll envy the single folk out there who can get a mani/pedi, go shopping or simply hang out with friends whenever they want;**

**4**

**Watch out, you're suddenly emo. You choke up at TV commercials, and no, I'm not even talking about those Petronas tear-jerkers! A simple KFC ad could get you going; and**

**5**

**The most important thing they never told you? You'll need support. I'm not talking about support from your partner, extended family or friends. Every working mother (and father) needs that. Thank God, I have that! But if you don't have the support of your bosses and the people you're working with, then your life may become a kind of daytime hell.**

When I returned to work after maternity leave, I thought I knew what to expect.

**1**

**That I'd miss my daughter;**

**2**

**That I'd have to change my work/lifestyle so I could fit in quality time with my baby; and**

**3**

**That I'd feel the conflict all working mums would — torn between wanting a career and not wanting to miss your firstborn's all-important milestones.**

Yes, all that happened.

Yet the reality hit me like a ton of bricks.

I realise now I was an anxious first-time mum. The transition to working full time again wasn't easy. I used to be your typical go-getter, never fazed by challenges (in fact, I lived off them) and constantly working late.

But for the first time ever, I was faced with a challenge that tugged at my heartstrings. I had a tiny, living, breathing person, who was literally a part of me, dependent on me to make things right for her.

I didn't quite know how to balance the two demands.

Apparently, I gave off the nervous vibes badly. This didn't go down too well with my team, which had been holding the fort while I was away. They were anxious for me to get back, to help with the workload and to be the leader I was before.

Meanwhile, I didn't realise how they were feeling as I

was consumed with my own struggles.

Things could have quickly spiralled out of control from there. Lucky for me, I work with an amazing boss. She's a mother of two, so she's been there and done that. She sat me down for what was to be one of the hardest conversations she's ever had with me (and trust me, she's had many with me!).

She told me how my team felt and that as their leader, I needed to address it.

Naturally, my first instinct was to be angry and defensive. I might have been leaving on time every day to tuck my daughter into bed, but I made up for it by working long hours at home. I was giving as much as I could despite being tired and an emotional mess!

Why didn't anyone understand?

That's when I realised that I couldn't assume anyone would know what I was going through. I had to talk to them, really talk, and I had to show some vulnerability. I had to treat them as people with feelings — only then could I expect them to treat me the same.

Once I had those conversations (uncomfortable though they were, especially when I had to speak to the men) ... things got a lot better. They knew where I was coming from. In turn, I knew I had their support as long as I made it clear that I'd be there for them even if I wasn't physically in the office.

I guess what this experience taught me is that our work environment doesn't condition us to think about helping folk who are in transition from one phase of life to another — whether it's first-time mums or someone who's going through a divorce or even an illness. And yet, if we truly want to retain people and create an environment that is conducive to working, that's exactly what we should do.

I was lucky to have a boss who cared enough to have the tough conversation with me. I was also fortunate to have colleagues who were willing to hear me out. But what are organisations in general doing about this? I'm not sure. All I know is not everyone would be as lucky as me, which may be why so many women leave the workforce soon after becoming mothers.

It may seem something small, but in my case at least, it has had a profound impact on how my career has fared since.

So, how are you going to support the next person you come across who's going through a transition?

*Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I may not forget you.* — William Arthur (American writer) **E**

Stephanie Caunter studied engineering but soon realised it wasn't meant for her. Today she heads PwC Malaysia's marketing & communications team. She counts herself lucky to learn a bit more every day about being a better wife, daughter, sister, friend, mother and teammate.

## Changing hats

by **Stephanie Caunter**

