

Coping with change

Being a mother doesn't always live up to your picket fence expectations. Learn how to be happy with the reality

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As an expectant mother, you enjoy an abundance of mythical dreams of family life and motherhood. You imagine yourself in a picture-perfect world, where you and your spouse are posed with your beautiful baby and adorable toddler. Both children are always clean and laughing and slot perfectly into your life without so much as a hiccup. You feel complete and,

if you're totally honest with yourself, just a little bit smug. Then the baby arrives and it seems as if an alien has invaded your world! Instead of living the dream you find yourself sleep-walking through a fog. You don't know what to do; you have no time for yourself, for your partner or for sleep. Everything has changed and you feel totally out of control.

The fact is that even the birth of a longed-for child brings with it huge

upheaval and disarray. Your easy, relaxed lifestyle falls by the wayside, as spontaneous outings and lie-ins on the weekend become a distant memory. You feel unprepared as the theory of motherhood is never enough when it comes to the reality. So where do you start to deal with this big life change?

Firstly, expect an emotional reaction. Often new mothers try to be strong and are overwhelmed by the swirling emotions and helplessness that can come along with the new baby. There is no right way to feel as a new mom and not everyone finds it easy or natural at first. Some suffer from anxiety and a lack of self-confidence in their ability to be a good mother. Others may feel they cannot cope with the new baby as well as other aspects of life, including older children, personal relationships, work and housework. There may also be some guilt to contend with as you resent the loss of freedom your old life afforded you. Lack of sleep, hormonal changes and loss of appetite can dull anyone's outlook on life, so be kind to yourself and realise it's perfectly normal to feel emotional. If you are worried then seek medical advice.

Accept that it will take some time to adjust to your new family dynamic. Don't put pressure on yourself to adapt immediately to your new role as parent. Nor should you expect your partner to slip effortlessly into his new role. Encourage each other and share the load. Fathers are often sidelined by the arrival of a newborn child. These days, with so many women working full time, it is reasonable to encourage the father to play a more hands-on role in child-rearing than in previous generations. Don't discount the part he can play in the baby's welfare and in your own! If you don't trust your baby's father to take care of her, ask yourself why. Is it because he's really not up to the job or is it your insecurities and anxieties kicking in? Let him in and you will both find it easier to adapt to your new roles.

In order for a positive dynamic to take root at home you will need to communicate how you feel to your partner and listen to how he feels. Be there for each other and understand where the other person is coming from. Spend time together, time alone and time building a new family unit.

Get into a routine as soon as possible. You can plan to some extent and you should. Meals can be prepared in advance and bottles can be sterilised and ready for when they are needed. Just be careful not to try and control everything –

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be flexible with your plans. The thing with life, especially in times of great change, is that it can't be controlled. Plan and organise what you can and let the rest be. You are in charge of your life and although you can't always control what happens, you can control how you react to what life may throw at you.

With a new baby, every outing becomes an expedition of epic

proportions. Time ticks by while you pack a baby bag with everything you can possibly think of in order to be prepared for every eventuality. Then you have to change the baby and probably yourself too, lug everything you need to the car, buckle her into the car seat and then you are finally ready to go. By then, you're exhausted and therefore getting out, especially in the early days, can seem too much to handle. But you must get out into the world, walk around the block or meet a friend for tea.

Take a look at the resources around you and make use of them. You may be surprised at what help is available to you. Resources could include people, finances, time or any special skills or knowledge you may have. Meeting mothers in a similar situation can be invaluable, especially if you are a stay-at-home mom, a mother of twins or have a special needs baby. When family and friends offer support or practical help, accept it. Learn to filter advice from well-meaning people. What worked for them might not be the best option for you, so go with your instincts.

Finally, know yourself and keep learning. How do you handle stress? What makes you happy? Your balance will probably be a bit skewed for a while after the baby's birth and this is only natural. However, you must still make sure that you indulge yourself from time to time because you deserve it. And so does your baby. You will be a better mom if you are relaxed and happy. Acknowledge yourself for how well you are coping and for what you are doing right. And if you aren't coping, don't ignore the problem. Seek help, be it personal or professional.

You can't rush change but it can help to remember that all change eventually becomes the new normal. So when you feel overwhelmed, remind yourself that this too shall pass. Count your blessings and enjoy your baby, for isn't this the most exciting life changing event imaginable? ■