

feel like a
bad mom?
forgotten
what
“me” time
means?
how you
can get
over your

new- guilt

It started when my daughter, Samantha, was born 16 months ago. After two sleepless nights, the nurses and my husband urged me to send her to the hospital nursery so I could get some shut-eye. Deep down I knew it was best, but I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt—how could I abandon my newborn daughter?

That was just the beginning. During the months that followed, I was ashamed letting my husband, who had work the next day, help with night feedings. I panicked that I wasn't giving Samantha enough tummy time. Even now, I feel bad if I feed her grilled cheese two days in a row.

Apparently, I'm not alone. "So many devoted moms think that no matter what they do for their children, it's not enough—and our culture plays into that insecurity," says Susan Douglas, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. But you can end the self-flagellation. Here, the top reasons that new moms feel guilty, and what you can do to get beyond it. >

BY DINA ROTH PORT PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL WESCHLER



mom

Don't want to be
with your kids
24 hours a day?
You're not a bad
mom—you're
human (really!)

you're more than a mom

"Moms today believe that they should be focused on their babies like a laser beam, so when they take a moment for themselves, they feel like they're being neglectful," notes Douglas. For many women, coffee with a friend or even a shower can be enough to ignite feelings of guilt. Lindsey Coffman of Springfield, Missouri, says she often puts off eating lunch until her daughter, Darby, takes her afternoon nap—which can be as late as 3 P.M. "If Darby needs help coloring or wants me to read a book to her, I feel like it's more important to do that than to eat."

Other moms say their guilt stems from working outside the home. "I have a full-time job, so I feel terrible if I spend any of my free time without my children, even if it's just for a thirty-minute trip to Target," says Mary Beth Matzek of Appleton, Wisconsin. "There's always a nagging voice saying I need to rush back to be with my kids." **how to get over it:** You've heard it before, but it's true: A happy mom makes for a happy baby. "If your basic needs aren't being met, you'll get worn down, possibly depressed, and won't be able to function as a good mother," says Bellport, New York, psychologist Eva Gochman, Ph.D.

Laura Williams of Williamstown, New Jersey, used to always feel guilty about going to the gym. Now, "I tell myself that when I work out, I sleep better and am more energized to keep up with my son the rest of the day," she says.

Bottom line: Every time you go out for a girls' night, sleep late on a Sunday, or get a manicure, you're doing your family a favor. You'll be in a better mood—and so will they.

you're not overcome with joy

Though Emma Haygood of Berrien Springs, Michigan, hates to admit it, she didn't love being a mom when her daughter, Ellie, was first born. "I was on a never-ending cycle of feeding, sleeping, and changing diapers and felt cut off from the world," she says. "I feel like I cheated both of us out of the first months because I wanted that stage to rush by."



“When you take time for yourself, you’re doing your family a favor”

able to expect to be, says Ross Glazer. Sharing your worries and frustrations with other new moms can help.

Also, go easy on yourself. "Just because you don't want to be around your child 24 hours a day doesn't mean you don't love her," says Aviva Pflöck, coauthor of *Mommy Guilt: Learn to Worry Less, Focus on What Matters Most, and Raise Happier Kids*. It's normal to mourn your prebaby life and important to realize that you don't have to give it up entirely. "As you settle into a routine, you can have some of that old life back—it's a balancing act that you get better at with time," she says.

you're not martha stewart

Kate Vasey of Rochester, New York, says she feels guilty when she hasn't cleaned the kitchen or the dust bunnies start to collect. "I tell myself that once my newborn is older, I'll have more time for household tasks. But then I order pizza for dinner again and the guilt comes rushing back."

It might seem very June Cleaver, but moms today still feel like they have to be quintessential homemakers, even when they have so many other responsibilities. Competition

Haygood isn't the only one. Most new moms believe they're supposed to bond instantly with their baby. "We have an expectation in society that motherhood is wonderful, so when you have a newborn you should be happy all the time," says Diane Ross Glazer, a licensed therapist in Tarzana, California. "But between hormonal fluctuations, trying to meet all of a baby's needs, and other daily stresses, there are a lot of reasons a new mom can have a down day."

Moms also tend to berate themselves if they long for the carefree life they had before kids. "After I had my first son, Erik, I felt guilty because there were times I'd have given anything to see a movie on a whim or soak in a tub—the small things you take for granted before kids," says Jessica Arivett of Dallas, Georgia. **how to get over it:** No one is happy every day and it's unreason-

between moms also adds stress—whether it's who brings the best dessert to the bake sale or whose child has the most creative art project. This pressure can be particularly great for stay-at-home moms because motherhood has become their new profession. "Our generation of women was brought up to believe that we could do anything and do it well—so when we became wives and mothers, we applied that high-achieving standard to our new roles, which is impossible to maintain," says Amy Tiemann, Ph.D., founder of *mojomom.com* and the author of *Mojo Mom: Nurturing Yourself While Raising a Family*.

how to get over it: First, remember that your baby needs you more than your furniture needs polishing. "It's important that your home is a safe environment where your child can learn and explore. It doesn't have to be ready for the president to come visit," says Pflock. In other words, don't fret if toys are all over the floor. And ordering takeout only means more time for you to spend with your family.

you're not following the rules

When Kim Aman's breastfed daughter, Lydia, was 5 months old, she wasn't gaining weight fast enough, so the Bremerton, Washington, mom had to supplement with formula—and felt like a failure for it. "I had planned on breastfeeding for at least a year, and I felt like I was cheating my daughter out of the benefits of breast milk," she says.

Not breastfeeding tops the reasons moms feel guilty, but it's all part of a bigger picture: Moms today feel like they're never doing enough for their kids. Experts attribute this feeling of inadequacy to the message that it's critical to give your child a head start—that moms need to play Mozart

during pregnancy or break out the flash cards at birth.

There are also moms who say they're worried that the decisions they're making are the wrong ones. "We have a lot more options than past generations had when it comes to our kids. And with those choices come anxiety, stress, and guilt," explains Pflock. I can relate. Every time I flip on the TV for Samantha, I remember the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation that kids under 2 not watch television at all. But for me it's a matter of survival—if it weren't for *The Wiggles* I'd never get anything done. So I live with the guilt; it means I can have time to throw in some laundry or read a magazine for 10 minutes (okay, 30).

how to get over it: "Parents are subject to a lot of marketing pressure to literally 'buy in' to enrichment tools," says Tiemann. "Any of them are probably fine as long as they are done for fun and in moderation. As soon as they become an imperative, they only undermine our confidence as parents." Sure, it's important to expose your children to different learning opportunities, but you can do that through everyday life at home, the grocery store, or the park.

Finally, ask yourself what's going to matter down the road: How many college applications ask whether you took a music class when you were 1? Susie Lancaster from Glendale, Arizona, says that she beat herself up for days when she accidentally pinched her son's chin in the car-seat buckle. Finally, a friend who has three kids set her straight. "She helped me realize that the most important thing is that my son knows he's loved," recalls Lancaster. "That's all he's going to remember about his infancy." ●

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guilt times two

having more than one child tends to bring along an enormous amount of guilt for moms, since it means having to share love and time between kids.

However, by easing the older child's adjustment to the family's new addition, he'll likely be more excited about his sibling, and you'll be less inclined to feel so torn.

Here, Stuart Teplin, M.D., an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina's School of Medicine, in Chapel Hill, and a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics, offers some tips:

Before the second child arrives, have your older one play with a doll or a stuffed animal. Show him how to feed the "baby," hold it, and change its diaper. "This symbolic play gets across the message that we love babies and can help the child feel more comfortable with some of the baby-care routines he'll see," says Dr. Teplin.

Show him picture books of babies or even photos and videos of when he was a newborn. This may give him a concrete connection to the baby's arrival.

Maintain a routine. Kids appreciate predictability, especially when they don't understand what's going on. Stick to normal bedtimes and mealtimes as much as possible.

Enlist the older child's help with the newborn. Ask him to grab a fresh diaper for you or pick out a shirt for the baby to wear. This reinforces his new role as the "big sibling" who is not only valued as much as before but can now also be even more important by being a helper. **Lastly, a new sibling can make older children feel they've been replaced and are losing their parents' love.** "The key," says Dr. Teplin, "is to involve the older child and set aside time to dote on him and reassure him that he is still very much part of the family."