

8 Ways to Get Back in the Game After the Mommy Years

OF THE 37 PERCENT of college-educated women who quit their jobs, many to raise children, 93 percent are ready to go back to work within about two years, according to data published in the *Harvard Business Review*. But by most accounts, trying to reenter is highly stressful—from facing down the “What have you done lately?” question to shaking off the kind of insecurity that comes with years of speaking mainly toddlerese. And most women who find new jobs, research shows, end up taking a marked pay cut.

To the rescue, fortunately, is a whole new slew of crash courses specifically designed for reentering women. *O* checked out a few of them to wrangle some tricks of the trade.

■ **MAKE A LIFE MAP.** Plan logistics like who your babysitter will be or what you’ll do about dinner well before you start looking for a job. “A sense of preparedness will, however subtly, translate to confidence,” says Monica McGrath, PhD, adjunct professor of management at Wharton and director of its Career Comeback course. “You might have to field those questions, and it helps to have honest answers at your fingertips.”

■ **GET UP TO SPEED.** “Most people—and companies—overestimate the extent to which industries have changed,” says Timothy Butler, PhD, head of Harvard Business School’s just-launched New Path program. Read *The Wall Street Journal*,

take a continuing education course—finance, computer skills, spreadsheets—and follow the trade publications. “It doesn’t take much to keep up-to-date,” Butler says, “and that action proves to management that you’re serious.”

■ **FIND SUPPORT.** “The most meaningful results we saw in our program were the connections made among like-minded women,” says Constance Helfat, PhD, codirector of Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business Back in Business 11-day executive course. Airing concerns to people who share your goals can reduce anxiety. “I watched a highly experienced woman say she felt

incapable, and the expression on the others’ faces completely changed her attitude,” says McGrath. “She did a 180.” You can start your own industry-driven women’s discussion club or join a board or blogging community. Also check out the Forté Foundation, a nonprofit resource for working women (forte.foundation.org), for options.

■ **STAY INVOLVED.** Doing contract and volunteer work are great ways to show a potential employer that your acumen and skills have stayed intact (ideally, you would take it on as soon as you leave the workforce). “Charity fund-raising, for example,

translates to money-generating potential on a résumé,” says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, PhD, president of the Center for Work-Life Policy and author of *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success*.

■ **NETWORK LIKE A BANSHEE.** “Before you go to bed tonight, write down the names of everyone you know,” suggests Butler. “Then, first thing in the morning, try to double that list”—you may suddenly remember how someone on your first list is friends with X, who runs such and such firm, which would be the perfect place to work. Alumni groups—from schools >

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to your last company—are also good sources of contacts. And it's helpful to keep your professional memberships current.

■ GET YOUR PITCH DOWN.

"Long explanations can make you sound defensive, so distill how you want to sell yourself," Hewlett advises. On your résumé, record all contract, committee, and volunteer work, using strong action verbs that stress the skills you honed. Back those

accomplishments with numbers if you can (how much money you raised as head of the soccer league's fund-raising drive, how many kids your church mentoring program tutored). In interviews, don't skirt why you opted out of the workforce. "Sell it for what it was—a well-thought-out, value-driven commitment," says Butler. "We're finding that companies are increasingly looking for people with reliable judgment and a sense of accountability."

■ **BE FLEXIBLE.** A 2005 Wharton study of reentering women showed that 59 percent joined companies that were smaller than their previous employers, 54 percent changed their roles, and 45 percent started their own businesses. Another trend to note is that financial institutions are beginning to actively recruit returning women.

■ **MIND THE GAP.** With a work history that already includes a

breach, it's important to ensure that your first new job is a good match. Put together a long list of positions for which you have at least some qualification, and rank the 12 that are most exciting to you. Discuss the results with four people close to you in order to identify the job qualities you find most appealing. Start sending applications only when you're willing to pledge at least a year to the job.

—SARA REISTAD-LONG



Marital Mood Leak

■ FOR BETTER OR FOR worse, when you get married, you sign on for a life of sharing—bedsheets, bathroom space, cold germs. Moods, too, as it turns out. And it's becoming increasingly clear that "emotional contagion," the unconscious tendency to mimic the emotions of others, affects spousal health.

Heart bypass patients with neurotic and anxious spouses, for instance, were much more likely to be depressed 18 months after surgery—independent of their own personality—according to one study led by John M. Ruiz, PhD, assistant professor of clinical psychology at Washington State University. The findings are troubling

because depression is known to put recovering cardiac patients at higher risk of further heart attacks and death. Another study showed that hardening of the coronary arteries was more likely in wives when they—or their husbands—expressed hostility during fights.

As for how one catches a partner's foul humor, the

brain's aptly named "mirror neurons" are to blame, says John T. Cacioppo, PhD, director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago and coauthor of *Emotional Contagion*. These neurons fire in response to other people's actions and intentions, especially when you care about the individual. So if you see that your husband is anxious or depressed, you literally feel his pain. There are, however, a few ways to prevent spousal mood infection.

■ **DISENGAGE.** When he makes a nasty remark and you give it right back, you're off to the races. You can avoid getting stuck in this loop by planning how you will respond to his negativity. One option is to walk away: Take a stroll around the block, go for a bike ride. Once you're on your own, you can see how much your partner's mood is really affecting you. If it's substantial, you might schedule more alone time in your relationship. Or ask him to exercise with you or visit a therapist (see "Play as a Team") to try to improve his

mood. If you're the problem, leaving the premises when you feel a funk coming on is also a good way to keep him—and the marriage—healthy.

■ LET HIM SEE THE LIGHT.

His doldrums could be a symptom of seasonal affective disorder—yours, too. If either of you is worse in the winter, cheerier when it's sunny, try installing bright full-spectrum lighting.

■ PLAY AS A TEAM.

Demanding that he go to a shrink is often not an effective way to motivate him to get help, says Cacioppo. Suggesting that you see a couples therapist together may prove more successful.

■ KEEP YOUR SPIRITS UP.

People who are content in their relationships are much less vulnerable to a spouse's neuroticism, according to Ruiz's research. On the flip side, in a happy marriage, one partner's optimism may rub off on the other—an actual health benefit. Did someone say *optimism*? The good news is, you can catch that, too. —KATHRYN MATTHEWS [BODYWISE MIND>236]