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:: Sherri Muroff Kalt



WOMEN REVEAL HOW THEY REALLY FEEL ABOUT MOTHERHOOD

Hint: Big Gap Between What They Expected and What They Got

By Sherri Muroff Kalt, Founder of The Authentic Mom

We all know what motherhood is *supposed* to be. We're *supposed* to feel fulfilled — and sometimes we do — but we have a nagging sense that something's missing. Society tells us that motherhood should fill us with joy — and sometimes it does — but we're also feeling anxious and overwhelmed. We look around us and it seems like all the other mothers have it so together — while we secretly worry we're not good enough. Everyone — whether it be a friend, family member, the media, or a so-called "expert" — has a formula for every aspect of parenting. But what if your experience doesn't exactly look like what everyone else describes?

What are mothers *really* experiencing?
And why have they been afraid to talk about it?

The way we feel about motherhood is a product of many different personal, family and societal influences coming together in ways that are complex — and continually changing over time.

Personal History

The creation of your own family involves dynamics that more closely resemble those of the family you grew up in than any other life experience. So it is not surprising that emotional issues arising from your childhood are likely to resurface when you become a mother. However, we may not consciously recognize that this is happening — or be able to make sense of the uncomfortable feelings we're experiencing. But whether or not we have this awareness, the childhood dynamics that shaped the way we think, feel and operate have a profound effect on the way we experience motherhood. Core beliefs about ourselves and the world influence how we perceive our children, interpret their behavior and respond to them — in essence, the very nature of our bonds with them.

Professional Status

Motherhood compels many women to make difficult decisions with regard to work. These choices often involve compromise, loss of financial and/or professional status, anxiety and guilt. Those who choose to pursue full-time careers frequently feel



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Professional Status continued...

overwhelmed by the sheer number of personal, professional, marital, and family responsibilities. Feelings of inadequacy and frustration are common, as are feelings of sadness and loss around the limited amount of time spent with their children. The financial need driving some of the decisions to work full-time creates additional stress — as well as a sense that there really is no “choice”. A general lack of affordable, high quality child care further complicates the decision to continue to work outside the home. Despite the adoption of family-friendly policies, American business culture demands long hours and a high level of commitment. Juggling the myriad needs and requirements in every area of life becomes a daunting — if not impossible task. No wonder so many women find work and family life to be incompatible.

Part-time work appears to offer the chance to come closer to finding a real life “balance”. Unfortunately, it often involves lower pay and/or limited opportunities for advancement. In addition, it can be hard to find part-time jobs in many professions.

Mothers who work in the home may experience a loss of status previously associated with their careers. In fact, the work of mothering is devalued in our culture, despite lip service paid to the importance of this role. The relative lack of structure, socialization/networking opportunities, and sense of professional accomplishment/recognition can be disorienting and discouraging. Given the degree to which our identities tend to be intertwined with our careers, we have needed the motherhood role to provide rewards typically found in the professional arena. Parenting has truly become a job in every sense of the word.

The So-Called Mommy Wars

For many women, becoming a mother heaps a huge number of new responsibilities on a plate that is already full. Inevitably, each person must place some needs/demands on the back burner. But doing so can ignite resentment, anxiety, and guilt. When we see another woman who has made a different set of decisions — who placed on her front burner what we placed on our back burner — these uncomfortable emotions quickly surface. Unfortunately, rather than using them as information about ourselves, we tend to project them onto the other person in the form of judgment, competition and disparaging remarks. This antagonism tends to obscure the fact that most mothers, regardless of their professional status, are actually struggling with similar issues and societal pressures. Moreover, writers such as Judith Warner have noted that our societal institutions do not adequately support mothers. Yet, rather than agitating for social change, women are turning on themselves and each other.

Marital Issues and Division of Labor

Parenthood can become a catalyst for tremendous changes in a marriage. Each partner struggles with huge individual adjustments, psychologically, emotionally and practically. Yet many women feel that their lives change to a far greater degree than those of their husbands. The stresses of parenting can throw preexisting problematic dynamics into high relief. Women are often shocked to discover that the challenges of parenthood can result in greater marital conflict rather than the strengthening of the bond they expected. The round-the-clock demands of child care — coupled with the rest of life’s responsibilities — often leaves little time to devote to their spouses. Indeed, many mothers report that their marriages become more like business arrangements and feel that they and their husbands are leading very different lives. Complicating this scenario are the long hours many men are working in demanding jobs, particularly in an increasingly competitive environment.

Raised to expect marital equality, many mothers are appalled to find themselves reverting to traditional gender roles. All too often the woman shoulders the vast majority of child care and household management responsibilities. Even if their spouses are more involved in these areas, women tend to be the “C.E.O.s” of family life; men may execute various functions, but women remain the strategic planners, doing most of the “mental work” of parenting. These circumstances tend to breed anger and resentment, complicated by a sense that change is unlikely. Given the numerous competing needs/responsibilities and the dynamics outlined above, many marriages descend rapidly toward the bottom of the priority list.

Child Care Situation

Decisions about child care are often fraught with ambivalence, anxiety and guilt. Some mothers worry about the emotional and developmental impact of having someone else care for their child. Others experience sadness around spending less time with their children than they would like. Even those who are relatively comfortable with their decision may struggle with feelings that they are *supposed* to be spending more time with their children. The lack of affordable, high quality child care creates tremendous stress for many working mothers, sometimes forcing them to sacrifice professional growth and advancement. Many women lacking a familial support system — and who cannot afford help — feel drained by carrying nearly all responsibilities on their shoulders.



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Financial Status

The costs associated with having a child can place significant strain on the entire family system. Some families must reduce their previous standard of living. Parents are working increasingly longer hours to meet their financial obligations. Financial need often drives the decision of many women to remain working outside the home.

The Influence of a Status-Obsessed Society

We live in a society that is absolutely *obsessed* with status and fixated on perfect performance and achievement. Inevitably, this trickles down into the parenting realm into forms that are all-too-familiar by now: getting your infants/toddlers in the best enrichment programs, ensuring they attend the right preschools, involving them in the proper activities, orchestrating their lives to guarantee acceptance into the best colleges, paving the way to the best jobs and lifestyles. This competitive, high pressure environment is causing women to feel overwhelmed, anxious and exhausted.

Pressure to be the Perfect Mother and Raise the Perfect Child

There is a pervasive worry that if we're not parenting perfectly — that is, in sync with what family members, child development "experts", and the media prescribe — we are setting our kids up to fail. The cultural message is clear: there is a formula for every aspect of parenting. It is up to you to discover the formula and apply it successfully. Failure to do so will jeopardize the future success of your child. The stakes feel so high; every decision is weighted with great significance. Is it any wonder why mothers are plagued by self-blame?

Pressure to Conform

The pressure to conform to what everyone else is doing and dictating is intense. We often end up feeling like there is something wrong with us if what we experience or what we're doing deviates at all from the norm. We soon learn to doubt our own intuition and judgment.

Pressure to Do it All

The concept that women can do anything is now a firmly entrenched belief, largely due to the feminist movement. Over time, though, this conviction has morphed into the expectation that we should be able to do *everything*. What began as a liberating, empowering idea turned into the ultimate perfectionistic requirement. While the Superwoman myth has been debunked at various times, the cultural messages — both subtle and overt — suggest that it is possible to do it all if you acquire the proper skills and apply the right formulas. A quick look at a list of typical needs/responsibilities makes it clear that this notion is absurd: work; household chores (including meal planning, cooking, cleaning, laundry), maintenance, and projects; errands (including

grocery shopping, dry cleaning, car maintenance, banking, clothes and gift shopping); child care planning and execution (including physical care, meal preparation, homework, school projects and events, fundraising initiatives, doctors, clothing, playdates, activities); marital relationship; financial management; personal grooming; exercise; medical care; personal social life; marital social life; caring for elderly parents; volunteer work. The attempt to tackle all of these areas leaves women feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, angry — and inadequate.

Losing Sense of Self

Most women struggle to some extent with identity issues upon becoming parents; they typically confront the loss of autonomy and various aspects of self, enormous lifestyle changes and shifts in professional status. This process is exacerbated by a society that encourages women to subjugate their needs to those of their children. More recently, many women find they have subsumed themselves in their role as mothers to such a great extent, they have drifted far from their core selves. Fully immersed in the lives of their children, women find it difficult to focus on their own needs. Inundated with a huge number of competing demands, mothers commonly report that their needs come last. This scenario is often experienced as a zero-sum game: more time devoted to self-care means less time addressing the needs of the household, especially the children. Many women discover that their sense of self becomes fused with their role as mother. Consequently, maternal self-worth becomes inextricably linked with children's competencies and achievements.



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Cultural Taboo Against Expressing “Negative” Feelings About Motherhood

We live in a culture that is extremely uncomfortable with the expression of any so-called “negative” emotion with regard to being a mother. Of course, it is acceptable to express frustration about certain developmental stages or child care functions that are commonly experienced as challenging. However, it is still largely taboo to acknowledge — much less publically admit — that we feel anything like disappointment, anger, or ambivalence. Filled with shame, many women are struggling silently — and alone. Motherhood triggers a full range of emotional experience; indeed, it is filled with conflicting feelings, often at the same time. Unfortunately, we expend so much energy on denying our uncomfortable feelings and trying to smooth out the conflicts rather than allowing our emotions to inform us about what we need and how we want to live.

Clearly, these personal and family issues and societal dynamics are incredibly broad in scope, impacting our quality of life in profound ways. It is time to give ourselves permission to talk about our *true* experiences of motherhood. Women need a safe place to get together and share the feelings associated with these experiences while getting the support of other mothers dealing with similar issues. Open dialog in a group setting can help women get in touch with what they really need and feel empowered to live a life that is truly in sync with those needs.

Mothers have begun to reveal what they really think and feel online in various chat rooms and message boards, but only under the cover of anonymity. Of course, women have been gathering informally to exchange information, but they generally do not explore internal experiences.

The Authentic Mom groups, led by founder Sherri Muroff Kalt at Full Circle Family Care and the YWCA of White Plains and Central Westchester, are enabling mothers to discuss the ways they have been affected by the challenges of motherhood. Group members uniformly express an enormous sense of relief that comes from knowing they are not alone. The group process helps them realize there are no formulas — there is no “right” way to parent. They discover that each of us experiences motherhood in a totally unique way — and that carving their own path is key to living an authentic life.