

From Culture Shock to Culture Shift



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My son, 'the Tiger' Cook, was born in February 2010. He knew what he wanted from day one and he took us firmly in hand to make sure he got it! I returned to part-time work as an appeals lawyer at the State DPP's office when he was about seven months old. He's now 17 months old, and a walking-talking embodiment of *joie de vivre*. While I'm at work he's living it up at a French immersion family day care. A typical toddler, he now says "Non" and "Je" for "No" and "me" but has yet to master please or thank you in either language.

Occupation: Mum? Lawyer? Mum/Lawyer? Lawyer/Mum?

I never thought parenting was an easy job, but I had no concept of how difficult and relentless (and at times utterly mundane) a job it can be. In many ways, the first year of motherhood is disturbingly similar to that first year of professional life. Nothing can actually prepare you for what being a lawyer is really like. Yet somewhere in there the learning curve moves from culture shock to culture shift as you adjust to being a lawyer ... and the same rings true for motherhood. But for many young lawyers, and many new mums, there is a darker downside.

We already know just how alarmingly high the incidences of psychological distress, depression and anxiety are in the legal profession – something that is being positively addressed through initiatives such as those recently implemented by the Society and the WABA. One of the pertinent findings of the 2009 *Courting the Blues Report* was that lawyers are reluctant to acknowledge psychological distress and to seek help for it. A high number of participants also expressed negative views of the effectiveness of medical help for depression.

In a way, this isn't surprising. Lawyers are good at lots of things, but we are not good at asking for help. We are not good at acknowledging the toll exacted on our mental and physical health by the constant external and internal pressures of the lawyerly life. And we really aren't good at not being in control. But in many ways, mothering is an experience defined by a lack of control.

Around one in four women having a baby in Australia will experience the negative impact of a depressive disorder in the first 12 months after the birth of their baby. Given that one of the risk factors for experiencing depressive symptoms following delivery is significant disparity between expectations of motherhood and the reality of motherhood, and the already high incidence of psychological distress in lawyers, it seems highly likely to me that professional women, such as lawyers, are at a heightened risk of experiencing psychological difficulty adjusting to motherhood.

Dr Jonathan Rampono,¹ head of the psychological medicine department at King Edward Memorial Hospital, has observed that for many women ending an office day with a clean desk

and a clear sense of achievement can stand in clear contrast to the never-ending tasks, responsibilities and lack of feedback that comes with motherhood.² Dr Rampono said:

"All they see now at the end of the day is a house that is more untidy than it was in the morning and it is going to be worse tomorrow. But we cannot over-emphasise how important this business of being a mother is to a baby's wellbeing. It is just that you cannot see it on a day-to-day basis."

Dr Rampono emphasises the importance of the work of being a mum, particularly in the crucial first year when the foundations are laid down for the child's whole life. It is vital, at that point, that women allow themselves to be less task-oriented and just stop and "waste time" with their babies:

"I say to some motivated and professional mothers, waste time with your baby. The time spent wasting time with your baby is just so important and you do not get that first year again."

"I always point out to mothers – particularly women over 30, for whom this is their first baby and who have had productive careers and now feel they are doing nothing except feeding and cleaning – that there are extraordinary changes in the hard-wiring of their baby's brain occurring."

In my view this advice is particularly helpful for lawyers adjusting to motherhood. Being a 'good' lawyer is often about thinking quickly, working quickly and being able to achieve pretty much anything we set our minds to. Being a 'good' mother, on the other hand, is about responding to your child – matching their pace – and, as Dr Rampono puts it "wasting time" with them. Unfortunately, the reality is that for many professional women, whose occupation has come to define their identity, the culture shift to mothering comes as a culture shock. Dr Rampono observes that it is difficult to prepare for the reality of being a mum, and the conflicting moments of joy and doubt:

Despite how tricky it can be to make the shift from the fast-paced, lawyerly life to the chaotic yet 'slow' motherly life, and the reality that many lawyers will experience post-natal mental illness as they enter motherhood, there is still a very real stigma attached to this issue.

"You can read all the books but you cannot really tell a woman what is exactly coming in front of them. There are all the joys, but there are multiple levels of, 'Why am I doing what I am doing?'"

To some extent, I found myself reeling from the culture shock of being a new mum and questioning why on earth I was devoting my life to my newborn baby, who seemed more like a fancy pet than a human being. I was forced, early on, to slow down to the Tiger's pace – he was 'one of those babies' who must be held. Constantly. All. The. Time. Day. And. Night. So for the first four months of motherhood I spent most days, and nights, on the couch with no choice but to "waste time" sitting still, feeding him, reading to him and holding him as he slept. Those months were difficult, to say the least, but they were the foundation for an incredibly strong and secure attachment between us. Despite the many moments I sat dolefully looking over at my neglected laptop, longing to check the Supreme Court website, I would do the same thing a thousand times over again.

My experience as a new mum was complicated by a number of health issues for the Tiger and my own experience of post-natal anxiety and depression. I was completely overwhelmed by crippling anxiety and, at my lowest point, I was literally fighting for my life. With the right medication, and the skilful care I received from health professionals, I found my way out of that dark place. But even when things were at their lowest ebb, very few people knew what I was going through. I was incredibly ashamed of how I felt and I truly believed that if I kept it utterly private, and kept everything 'perfect' in appearance, it might all go away. And, just like the lawyers surveyed in the *Courting the Blues Report*, I was reluctant to seek medical help. I was operating on the assumption that I could just keep coping. Pretty quickly, though, I realised that there was a real chance my preoccupation with how I felt might negatively impact upon the Tiger, and that was the motivation for me to seek help. With that help, things got better. I would strongly encourage anyone experiencing any level of distress, depressive symptoms or anxiety to do the same. And I would encourage them to do what I didn't – to enlist the support of their friends and family and any colleagues that they feel comfortable confiding in.

Despite how tricky it can be to make the shift from the fast-paced, lawyerly life to the chaotic yet 'slow' motherly life, and the reality that many lawyers will experience post-natal mental illness as they enter motherhood, there is still a very real stigma attached to this issue. I know that, for me, it was a very finely balanced decision to include my own experience of depression and anxiety in this article.

Yet the more that I learn about mental health, the more I begin to see it as health professionals do – just another aspect of a person's health that needs attention. Seeking professional help, whatever may be the problem, is not a failure but rather a simple acknowledgement that something needs adjusting. I personally experienced a massive sense of relief from the perspective that I gained through working with health professionals to tackle the problems I was experiencing. The difficult symptoms I experienced were just that – symptoms of an illness. They were nothing actually to do with me and do not define me as a person, mother or lawyer. I think that distinction often gets lost when we talk about mental health and in the way we think about people who have experienced difficulties with their mental health.

I found it invaluable to hear other women (many of whom are professionals) talk openly about their own experiences of post-natal depression, regardless of the stigma that attaches to mental health issues. I have been pleasantly surprised how many lawyers share their own stories of experiencing depressive symptoms and anxiety in the workplace once they have an opening to do so. I hope that by sharing part of my experience I can encourage other lawyers, whether they are new mums or not, to think about the impact their lawyerly lives have upon their mental health, and particularly for those lawyers becoming mums (or dads), to educate themselves about good emotional health, be aware of the symptoms of psychological difficulties, and to seek help if these kinds of issues arise.

NOTES

1. Dr Jonathon Rampono MBChP MFGP FRANZCP Consultant Psychiatrist.
2. Credit to Marnie McKimmie. "Emotional Health Combats Post-Natal Depression", *The West Australian*, 4 September 2009. Dr Rampono's comments are taken from his interview (with his permission) with Marnie McKimmie.



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