

Transition to Motherhood in Academic Medicine: The New and Seasoned Mother

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New mother: As I sit down to write, my partner is caring for our 3-month-old baby. We are first-time parents. My spouse is also a physician, entering second year of fellowship training. While I recognize my partner's superhuman excellence, I am entitled to feel like our parenting roles are different. Aren't I?

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Though we did not intend to create these divides, they are our reality. Yet, I still feel that I am expected to spread myself paper thin in order to balance being a mother, physician, educator, wife, colleague, and friend. I find myself questioning if this is all my own doing. Maybe I am just not performing at a high enough level? I see my colleagues with children finding the balance, so why can't I? I am exhausted. Last week, I saw a patient that questioned whether I would return full time as a woman physician (his words, not mine). I was so excited to walk into his room after my leave and proclaim, "See, I am back working full time like I said I would!" Did I really owe this to him or anyone else? Was it wrong that I wished I had come back part-time—Just like he expected me to? I am feeling depleted, both personally and professionally.

Being a woman physician in academic medicine has numerous challenges. Ludmerer [1] emphasizes that progress has occurred now that medical schools are nearing an equal number of men and women enrollees, but ongoing barriers to professional advancement and research for promotion place women at a continued disadvantage. The article thus challenges organizations to correct the imbalance of woman leaders as part of diversity and social justice. Other studies have shown similar results of fewer women in leadership positions and longer time to promotion regardless of productivity and number of children [2]. In a study by Ono [3], women felt discriminated against in the promotion process. Expectedly, women are more likely to be burnt out, with barriers to professional advancement noted as a contributing factor [4].

Seasoned mother: My youngest is two years old. As a full-time clinician-educator and mother, I have encountered many obstacles in my career. I constantly feel a double standard to equally balance my personal and professional lives—the pull to literally be in two places at once. Most weeks are spent juggling schedules and working to meet rigorous requirements for promotion. I have considered a career outside of academic medicine, one where I could focus solely on patient care without the pressure and expectation of scholarly production. And when I first returned from maternity leave, I asked myself those same questions, "Was life greener on the other side? Could I truly find the balance between my personal and professional lives?" In retrospect, I find it vital to normalize those concerns and support that it is ok to never fully find the balance.

Continued: As a first-time parent, I was vastly unprepared for what holding my child for the first time would do to me viscerally. My purpose and priority immediately shifted. I questioned every level of who I was. Was I going to be a good mother? Should I move closer to family for support? Am I going to successfully balance work and a child? After maternity leave, I didn't know if I wanted to go back to work. I was fortunate to have two outstanding mentors that helped me transition back. They had stood in my same shoes and, as working mothers, they provided support and perspective. They allowed me to cry, and with those tears, they allowed me to wash away unwarranted feelings of guilt. They validated my insecurities while encouraging me to still feel enough. They were sounding boards with indispensable perspectives, and the solutions that came from our conversations allowed me to forge ahead. Day-to-day, I also leaned on nurse practitioner colleagues in my workroom, both of whom had children close in age. They provided a sense of support and connection. And advocacy did not just come in the form of women in medicine. As an M3, I was mentored by an attending whose love of medicine and education was infectious. That palpable fervor led me to my career in academic medicine, and he continues to challenge and support me as one of my fiercest advocates.

Continued: As you transition back to work, normalize that life's challenges will continue. As a working mother, you may struggle to find the balance. This is normal. As a woman physician, you may struggle with professional barriers. This is, unfortunately, normal. I recently learned that one of my mentors is moving to another institution. So just when my work-life seemed balanced, a disruption occurred. This news created an overwhelming feeling of loss and sadness, but I am comforted in knowing our relationship will continue. The tools she provided have undoubtedly contributed to my success to date, and I will continue to lean into the life lessons I have learned along the way.

New mother: As I put my baby down in preparation to catch up on progress notes from last week (and maybe some from the week before), I feel at peace that I am not alone in this internal struggle.

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