

Weston

BY HILARY S. BERGER, ED. D.

CAREERS ON HOLD

AS LABOR DAY APPROACHES, MOTHERS ARE UNMERCIFULLY THROWN into the world of back to school shopping, the much anticipated class list, and after school sports and activity registrations. The normal "butterflies" accompanying this change of season may be best explained by the onset of a new school year, a new class and teacher to adjust to, new friends to meet ... excitement and ambivalence acting simultaneously.

September is a time we have become conditioned to associate with starting anew, and embarking on new challenges. But for stay at home mothers, it can be a reminder of another year passed, where they experience a deeper sense of loss of their personal identity, continued loss of confidence in their professional skills and a further lack of clarity and purpose in their own life. This Silent epidemic has important implications for the mental health of women today. Is there a way for moms who devote themselves to staying at home while raising their children to also be devoted to themselves? Must moms lose so much of their self-definition, and their career identity in order to be good Mothers? Women of this generation have achieved unprecedented academic and professional success before entering parenthood. Unlike our mothers or grandmothers, today's women often come to motherhood fully enveloped by a strong professional identity. Women spend much of their young adulthood being validated for their on-the-job achievements, making significant contributions to their professions, earning competitive salaries, and enjoying the important professional network a working person comes to rely upon.



Reentering the job market is less daunting for women who assess their changing interests, skills and values and connect them to career options.

When women leave the workplace to raise children, they are largely unaware that they are leaving aspects of their best self behind. As days, months and years pass, women's belief in their own skills and abilities may diminish until they no longer connect to this "old self." Society doesn't acknowledge the magnitude of this epidemic; rather like most complex issues, it has created neat, simplistic ways to categorize mothers. Either you "stay at home" with your children or you go "back to work." Each has its benefits and challenges. Women soul search and grapple to

make this decision when their children are born and their parenting experience unfolds from there. Most stay at home moms make the choice to be home with their eyes wide open and wouldn't do it any other way. There are unquestionably tremendous rewards to this choice. However, these same women can face undeniable blows to their self-esteem and report feeling overwhelmingly lost and unfulfilled. As women change from professionals to stay at home moms, their social interaction moves from the office to Starbucks, ball fields, book clubs, tennis courts, play groups, supermarkets, nail salons, school meetings and car-pool rides. Women can become exhausted physically and starve intellectually. Anyone raising children today knows it's a full-time commitment of the heart and soul. Yet the media and corpo-

rate America seem to send a different message to our stay at home mom. Imagine the effect on one's self esteem when she hears those near and dear inquire, "Oh you don't work?" "What do you do with all of your time?" "What is it like to have a life of leisure?"

In our society, the value of service is often associated with dollars. We need no reminder that there is no salary for being a mom. Unlike previous generations, today's mom knows exactly what she gave up by not earning a paycheck. Women report countless examples of subtle cues insinuating they are "less than" because they are not "at work." Women do want to be there for their kids, and largely enjoy providing an anchor for their families. But there may be an overwhelming sense of guilt as well; since they "chose to stay home: they should feel "fortunate to be home," and therefore feelings of "loss of self" are their own fault.

To cope with this confusion, high functioning, intelligent women find themselves consumed with the beautification of their homes, involvement with their children's schools, their bodies, excessive shopping,

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completing endless errands for their children and husbands lives, and maintaining order in the home. Some eat or drink too much, or become dependent on over the counter and prescription drugs. To accommodate for feelings of isolation and the need to make meaningful connections to others, women often assume more volunteer roles than they can handle, leaving them further depleted rather than fulfilled.

A woman is the CEO of the home; the master facilitator of her children's and husband's lives, often spending more time in her SUV on a cell phone than anywhere else. Her existence becomes a 24-hour marathon of activities aimed at the service of others. But is she fulfilled personally? It is understandable that a woman may feel as if she is "disappearing," and an otherwise healthy individual become at risk. Many women are perfectly content in their role as full time mom and do not experience this cognitive confusion. Generally, those with a strong professional identity prior to having kids struggle more than others.

You don't have to wait until your youngest is going off to school to embark on efforts to improve the quality of your life. It is yet another myth that when your child goes on the bus "you will get your life back." Yes, you will have the hours between 9 and 3 back, but without goals and a plan to achieve them, not much will change. The truth is that with each year that passes, we lose touch with our educational and professional identity, and the confidence to go out there and take risks. Our skills become outdated, our contacts often no longer exist. Worst of all is the tremendous sense of being an outsider to the working world, lacking a

sense of confidence in our marketability (often rightly so), not having any idea how to translate many years of raising children into a resume. Many women at this point turn to quick fix options for careers that often do not suit them. Unfortunately, many of us never developed the ability to connect individual interests, skills and values to career options. If you think back to how you came to your decision for choosing a major in college or how you decided to pursue your first job out of college, it probably had little or nothing to do with a good occupational fit for you. Waiting until the end of your senior year in college to think about your career did not work well either. Similarly, disassociating yourself from your future professional endeavors during your years at home with kids does not serve you. Embarking on activities that incorporate your unique interests, skills, personality and values will add immeasurable value to your life at home as a mom. You can feel in control of your future and enjoy high self-esteem without necessarily "going off to work."

Common Questions and Concerns from Moms Contemplating Career Development

- "I'm so unfocused, how can I possibly go to work?"
- "The money I'd earn wouldn't even be enough to cover the costs of a baby sitter."
- "I'm scared I will fail and become embarrassed and humiliated."
- "Who will take me seriously after being out of work so long?"
- "Who has the time to work? Demands of home and children are full time. How would I find the time?"
- "I don't want to start at an entry level with 20 year olds"
- "I used to be good at what I did but I don't want to do that anymore. Now what?"
- "My husband doesn't think I should do anything right now."
- "I'm intimidated by modern technology. I can't compete."

The points below are tips designed uniquely for mothers who may be considering embarking on their career development and improving the quality of their lives.

- Your primary obstacle is your self-confidence. Focus on building yourself back up.
- You are not returning to work. Not by a long shot. You are embracing a new stage in your career development which incorporates family and professional activities. It looks nothing like your life in your 20s. You are off the hook.
- You are setting priorities for your day-to-day life that will make sense to you.
- Everybody's timeline is different. Whether you intend to start working outside the home in 6 months or 6 years, it is absolutely fine. Get started now.
- Be prepared to feel overwhelmed... in a good, exciting and challenging way.
- Have a sense of humor about yourself. It has been a while since you seriously visited this part of your life and you may discover you have some work to do.
- This process is not a straight, predictable road. Rather, it is filled with interesting, unexpected turns and bumps, often ending up in an unexpectedly wonderful place.

BalanceSheet

- * Take one step at a time. Every small bit of progress leads you somewhere new.
- * Don't give up! "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration" T. Edison
- * Reclaiming your professional identity is a psychological state of mind leading to renewed self confidence. Just the decision to get started leads to improved mental health.
- * You don't have to compromise your parenting choices to have professional fulfillment.
- * Acknowledge your discomfort with your self and allow it to lead to self-exploration. Don't put a band-aid on it with another random commitment.
- * Assess the areas in your life that are lacking purpose and focus: Career, Political, Health, Relationships, Creative Outlets, Desired Skills.
- * Carefully assess the quality of your time commitments. Carve out a small amount of time for your career/life planning activities no matter what anyone says. Treat it with the same importance you place on your child's after school activities.
- * Limit volunteer obligations to value-added experiences.
- * Set out a more realistic, flexible time frame toward achieving small attainable goals. Small, steady steps toward your goal are better than no steps at all.
- * You are taking multitasking to a new level. The good news is that you are focusing on your goals and moving slowly toward them. The bad news is it is not always neat and tidy. You'll learn how to wear both hats and survive.
- * Give up perfectionist tendencies. Be forgiving of yourself, realizing that under the best of circumstances things come up whenever children are in the picture. People are more forgiving than you think.
- * Strive to do what you love; you can start slowly and in a small way now, and when your children are more independent you will be positioned to have full access to the career you want.

A woman's career development is a fluid, adaptable, and ever-changing path through the lifecycle, where she has the power to purposefully weave her own career/life goals into the ongoing work of facilitating family goals and dreams. Her professional work takes on different shapes and forms depending on what stage of life she is in. There is nothing more precious than the experience of a child having a mother who feels content and vital in her own existence. There is no question that raising young children poses unique challenges to any mother's sense of vitality, yet it is my opinion that it is a mother's responsibility to both herself and her family to strive to parent with her full range of abilities and talents.

This dance of "self versus other" will continue to challenge women. Can today's mothers rewrite history with a revised version of this chapter of a woman's life-experience so that their daughters may embrace a more balanced, healthy, proactive, and self preserving model of parenting? A mother needs to be encouraged to own a distinctive place in her family, where she is empowered to actively pursue her individual ambitions, goals and dreams, separate from the needs of her family, without apology. *W*

Hilary S. Berger Ed. D., a Weston resident and mother of four, has her doctoral degree from Columbia University's Teachers College, is a licensed counselor and specializes in counseling men and women in transition and other career management issues. Presently she is in private practice and works with individuals ranging from high school through retirement. She proudly offers groups and seminars focusing on Career Development for Stay at Home Mothers, has authored numerous articles and is an adjunct professor at Norwalk Community College. For information on counseling services, seminars and group, e-mail her at hiljoyberger@aol.com.

Fall 2004 Programs and Services

Group Meetings

Session 1:

Career Development Group for Stay at Home Moms (Size Limited)

Tuesdays from 10:00-11:30 am

Dates: October 5, 12, 19, 26

Place: 17 Tannery Lane North, Weston

Fee: \$150.00 (additional \$50 fee for career testing)

Facilitated by Dr. Hilary Berger

Session 2:

Career Development Group for Stay at Home Moms (Size Limited)

Thursdays from 10:00am -11 :30am

Dates: October 21, 28, November 4, 11

Place: 17 Tannery Lane North, Weston

Fee: \$150.00 (additional \$50.00 fee for career testing)

Facilitated by Dr. Hilary Berger

Seminars:

"Career Issues for Stay at Home Moms...More Than Meets the Eye"

Date: Thursday October 14, 2004

Time: 9:30-12:30

Place: The Weston Grange, Lyons Plains Road, Weston

Fee: \$20.00 in advance/\$25.00 at door

Facilitated by Dr. Hilary Berger

To register for any of the above, email hiljoyberger@aol.com

