

## **Take time for yourself**

Dear new Mum,

I found becoming a mother a terrifying experience. The responsibility of keeping a tiny helpless being alive overwhelmed me in those first few months, especially when my husband went back to work. In a society and culture where we don't often get to experience caring for very young babies before we have our own, it did really feel like a trial by fire. So....here I write a letter to that new-born mother, myself, nearly seven years ago, with all the reassurances that I could possibly give.

### **Babies cry**

"Nobody tells you about the crying" I remember thinking to myself, over and over again. Of course I knew that babies cry. What I didn't know is how often they cry (some babies barely give a peep, many babies cry a lot!), or how that first wail would literally send a physical jolt through my body (usually ending in my boobs – a not too subtle hint). It was like a Pavlovian reaction: baby cries, I leap out of bed/chair/day-dreaming fully armed ready for action. And this gets exhausting, when it goes on for days, weeks and months.

There's a lot of literature and pressure out there on what to do about babies crying, especially when your baby, like mine, never slept more than 40-45 minutes in one session. From "don't ever let them cry" to "cry it out", I always felt that I was doing it wrong, not least because my baby kept crying and sleeping badly.

To my new-mother self, I would say: babies cry. It's a fact of life. And all babies are different. Some cry a lot. Some don't cry much. But you will learn about your own baby's needs. You will learn by experience. If your baby is well safe, fed, warm, tired and reluctant to retreat from the world (like mine was), sometimes a big cry helps them fall into a deeply peaceful sleep. Trying to stop your baby from ever crying is like trying to keep an adult always in a state of blissful happiness: it's impossible and exhausting, for both. Allow your baby to express herself. It's okay for babies to cry, and you will learn to trust your instincts about how much crying you and the baby together can bear. And it's good to give yourself a break from the crying. Feed bub, cuddle bub and pass them over to another person: your partner, your mum, and let them care for that crying baby so that you can sleep out of earshot and regain your balance.

### **The days and nights blur into one**

Learning how to breastfeed lying down can be life-saving! With my second child I was much more prepared for the night feeds and less worried about getting a "good night's sleep". Set up a double mattress on the floor in the lounge room, leave on soft light and even music playing overnight. And when your baby wakes in the middle of the night (for the first, second, third time...) enjoy the calm, blissful peace of feeding, just the two of you while the rest of the world is sleeping. I know that the SIDS recommendation is never to sleep with

your baby. But for me, to be able to lie down and feed during the night, to drift in and out of wakefulness while my baby fed, and then to leave him blissful, fed and still sleeping, safe on the mattress on the floor, and slip back into bed with my husband was heaven. With my first child I was so worried about SIDS that I would feed sitting up, and then transfer bub back into his own cot each night, and it was utterly exhausting.

In the day, sleep when baby sleeps. Prioritise sleep for yourself over everything else if you have to. For the period of time that you're not working, let your body clock adapt to those of the baby, letting the days and nights blur into one. Eat at midnight. Keep glasses of water all over the house (breastfeeding always makes you thirsty) and don't put too much pressure on yourself to lead a "normal" lifestyle.

### **This too will pass**

If you have a baby that sleeps badly, it can feel like a never-ending cycle of exhaustion and that you will never ever have any time or energy for anything ever again. But the poor sleeping phases will pass. It may take 3 months, it may take 2 years, but it will slowly, slowly get better. And your baby/child/toddler will eventually sleep through the night. Trust that one day you will suddenly realise that that "baby" period of broken sleep of your life has ended, and, as strange as it may seem now, you may grieve its passing.

### **Take time for yourself**

Take time for yourself. Trust your husband/partner to care for the baby. Leave the house for a couple of hours. Walk on the beach. Get a massage. Visit a friend. That geographical distance helps you to reset, to emerge into the big wide world and return with renewed energy and perspective.

And lastly, you are not alone. Call a friend, an aunty, a sister, a mother, a breastfeeding helpline.....Connect with other women that will support you, that will build your confidence and can empathise. Motherhood is not a competition. It can be part of our own personal journey into adulthood: that responsibility, that deep care and connection that comes with giving birth and caring for a newborn is a wild, but deeply powerful, experience that changes us all.

Xo