

Twenty Stress Busters For New Mothers

This article is dedicated to all mothers, new and experienced, who give so much of themselves to their families. Happy Mother's Day!

Motherhood brings with it a profound life change. In the early post-partum new mothers and those close to them concentrate their priorities on helping the mother and baby recover from the birth process. Typically partners and other family members and friends provide wonderful, thoughtful and loving support to this new mother-baby dyad. A few weeks down the road, however, reality strikes. Help! There are no more meals in the freezer, your partner is back to work, grandma has returned to Toronto, and you don't fit into any of your pre-baby clothes. If you have experienced something like this, take heart – you are not alone. Some of the aspects of new motherhood that drive us crazy are; the unpredictability in your life, hour by hour, a feeling of loss of control and choice, and general disorder in your household. You can't do it all, and do it all well. Now is the time to re-assess your priorities, and to develop a lifestyle that works for you and your family. Here are some words of wisdom collected from mothers who have learned how to adapt, and to enjoy their new life with baby.

1. **Conserve your energy any way you can.** Sleep when the baby sleeps. Don't stand when you can sit. Close your eyes whenever you can.
2. **Eat regularly.** A number of small meals throughout the day are more satisfying than a few large ones. Favourite snacks for new moms are; power shakes made with yogurt, fruits, milk and/or egg, bagels and muffins, vegetables, fruits, nuts and cheeses. These snacks provide longer lasting energy, and more nutrition than snack foods like cookies and chips.
3. **Never say no to offers of help.** Have a list in your head, or in your pocket of all the chores and tasks you just haven't got around to doing. Share your list with anyone who will listen and help.
4. **Prioritize!** Decide on what must be done now, and what can be left maybe forever!
5. **Take time for yourself.** Ten minute breaks can do wonders throughout the day. Remember that people working outside of the home get regular breaks and a lunch hour. At the end of the day ask yourself "What have I done for me today?" You are more able to give to others when your own needs have been taken care of.
6. **Develop connections with other mothers.** Share your experiences with others who understand and support you. All mothers have stresses around how to balance their multiple roles as well as motherhood.
7. **Get outside with your baby at least once a day.** Fresh air and exercise do wonders for everyone.
8. **Create a "peaceful place."** If an untidy house drives you crazy, keep one room tidy where you can go to relax and feel serene.
9. **Simplify your household.** Clutter creates stress. If you can reduce the clutter you will often reduce the stress. Try organizing one small area of the house when you have the time and inclination to do so. You will be amazed at how good you feel afterward.
10. **Establish places for things, and put them in their place.** For example, put your keys and purse in the same place each time you come home. You will save a lot of time and frustration not looking for these items later.
11. **Keep reminder lists.** Use lists to keep track of essential chores and tasks to be completed. For example, "Send Aunt Jean a birthday card," and "Make a dental appointment." Be careful of lists, however, as they can become monsters that intimidate you and make you feel inadequate if you don't work through the tasks on them. Keeping your lists next to your calendar and phone is a great way to set up a home command post.

12. **Do ten minute tasks.** Only attempt to complete jobs that will take ten minutes or less. For instance, you probably cannot clean all the windows at once, so try doing one each day instead.
13. **Be laundry smart.** Don't fold laundry unless you find this activity satisfying and enjoyable. A few plastic laundry baskets can be used to separate your clean and dirty laundry. Just pull the clean laundry out of a basket when you need it. Iron clothing only when it is essential.
14. **Strive to be imperfect.** Lower your expectations of yourself, your partner, your baby, your housekeeping and cooking.
15. **Learn to daydream.** Dream about anything and everything. Quiet thought is a wonderful way to slow down and get to know what is of interest and value to you.
16. **Laugh more, and forgive more.** Does it really matter if your partner put the diaper on backwards?!!!
17. **Learn to say NO.** Extra chores and activities will only rob you of your rest, and time to enjoy being with your baby. Beware of people who say "since you're at home anyway..."
18. **Be kind when assessing your post-partum body.** It can take months to lose all of your pregnancy weight, and you may even retain some of it. Regular exercise and sensible eating is all that is advised for most women, but the transformation does not happen overnight. A new hair cut and some comfortable clothes can make a big difference to how you feel. Share your feelings about "the new you" with your partner; he needs to know how you feel.
19. **Let go of images of perfection.** Stop apologizing. I'm late, fat, incompetent, forgetful, moody, confused, etc. Do the best you can with what you have to give. This is all you should ask of yourself. There is no such thing as the perfect parent, partner, child, house, meal, etc.
20. **Accept advice graciously.** It can be anywhere from irritating to devastating to receive unasked for advice. Try to be open and respectful to the sender, use only advice that makes sense to you and fits your baby then forget the rest. Avoid debating with people who have different opinions than yours. Save your energy for more enjoyable activities. A thought for the day: "My house is clean enough to be healthy, and dirty enough to be happy!"

Susan Miller RN BScN is a parent and perinatal educator. She teaches, coordinates and develops prenatal, post-natal and early parenting programs in the Greater Victoria area.