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## What Postpartum Moms Really Need

When I became a parent at the ripe old age of 24, I was glad to kiss a difficult pregnancy goodbye and embrace the joys of new motherhood. But while the joys were many, so were the challenges. I thought I had been adequately prepared to reach a whole new level of sleeplessness, to feed someone from my own body more than I fed myself, to answer every beck and call and do it effortlessly.

Now the word "prepared" seems laughable to use in the context of becoming a parent -- literally, becoming a whole new version of yourself, shedding your old skin and giving birth to the mother in you from the moment you give birth to your child. There is no way to prepare for motherhood and I wish I'd known that. But I also wish I'd known how to ask for help.

No matter what age you become a parent it's a lot like being thrown to the wolves. But no one really talks about it that way. Everyone talked about the baby bliss, the love I'd feel, the joy, the natural instincts. And while I certainly felt those things, I also felt depleted, overwhelmed, exhausted and utterly alone. What was worse was that those emotions made me feel like a failure because I wasn't "supposed" to be feeling them. At least no one had warned me that I would. Everyone assumed I was overjoyed, and so I played the part.

It doesn't help that our culture here in the U.S. doesn't cater to postpartum women. Typically, new mothers are expected to be back on their feet in no time. Paid maternity leave is abysmal in terms of length and pay rates when compared to other countries -- if it's offered at all. And though we have some of the highest rates of birth interventions, leading to lengthier recovery times and more emotional struggles post-birth, we still expect the glowing mother and happy baby almost immediately.

While other countries dote on postpartum women, rally around them and consider "postpartum" more like a year than our typical six weeks, we tell women to get back to themselves, back to work and back to the gym. We gaze at magazine covers of flat bellies and uphold women who breeze through postpartum and say "she got her body back in just eight weeks -- good for her!" But is it? Good? For anyone?

If this is our standard, what are we doing to the women who don't live up to it? Which, in truth, is most women. Four and a half years after becoming a mom and watching friends turn the same corner, I know this to be true. We come into motherhood expecting to bounce right back and when we don't we're confused, sad, anxious and guilt-ridden. We wonder where our bodies went, what happened to us and why is this so much harder for me than other women? Why do our

babies not sleep through the night at just a few months old? And what are we doing so terribly wrong?

For some strange reason we're taught to pretend it's all gravy. We're taught to make it look easy, even if it means tuning out our newborns cries in an effort to get a good night's sleep. Even if that means we switch to bottles long before we're ready because assimilating back into the world with udders that make us feel more like cattle than women is not as pleasant as we thought. When everywhere we look, society tells us to cover up and our jobs don't support our efforts to feed our babies, why would it be? While for most new moms the thought of handing their newborn over at six weeks is terrifying, we routinely tell women it'll be good for them. In essence, we're taught to look the part more than be it. We're taught to get out of our bathrobes and into our skinny jeans, out of the house and back into the world at lightning speed.

For many of us, it's too soon and we aren't ready. The world wants us back on our feet, but someone should really be rubbing them. We've gone through one of the biggest shifts life can bring and with unrealistic expectations and without proper support, it can be a thousand times harder than we ever saw coming.

What postpartum women really need is to be understood rather than the expectation that we should be photo-ready when the only thing we are ready for is a nap. We need people to talk about how hard this time is, instead of how happy we should be. We need time to embrace our babies, rather than the stress of what else we should be doing and how far we're falling behind. We need opportunities to talk, vent, cry and feel and know that it's okay. We need a more embracing society that doesn't mind breasts feeding babies as much as it doesn't mind them in magazines and movies. We need people to make meals, rather than expect to hold our brand new babies. We need partners who wake up in the night to give a back rub or a "you're doing great." We need friends who say "I've been there." What postpartum moms really need is a world that allows us to be mothers from all angles, even if it's not as pretty as we wanted to believe.

Postpartum is a sacred time and we need to start treating it that way. As I gear up for my second stint, I'm hoping it will be a little less tumultuous than my first. But this time, I won't be putting on my happy face at all costs. I'll be giving myself the time to heal, surrounding myself with people that understand and being real, even if it means rocking a muu-muu for three months. I'll just have to tell *US Weekly* to come back in the fall.