

## When will I feel like me again?

You've probably asked "When will I feel like me again?" at some point since your baby was born. If you haven't, you can be sure that one of the parents sitting next to you in your toddler group has. Often we think we're the only one feeling this way, or we fear being judged that we are not doing a good enough job as a parent if we admit to our struggles. If you do ask yourself this question sometimes please be reassured that it is totally normal, and you are definitely not alone!

### Acknowledging that times have changed

It is really common for parents to feel like they have lost a part of who they used to be when they have a baby, as their sense of identity changes. Perhaps you were working full-time before so work was a huge part of your identity. Maybe you used to go away for romantic weekends with your partner, or maybe you used to like a spontaneous date night at the cinema. Perhaps you loved a lie-in on the weekend, or an all-day shopping spree with your best friend. When you have a baby often these things change enormously – the amount of sleep you get, for starters! Sleep deprivation can very quickly become an all-encompassing obsession as your previous eight hours of beauty sleep can turn into two- to three-hour snatches if you're lucky in-between feeds. It goes without saying that spontaneity tends to go out of the window for a while, and you develop muscles where you didn't even know you had them with all the baby gear you need to hike around just to be able to leave the house!

Your body changes when you have a baby. Experts say it takes at least a year for a woman's body to recover, maybe even longer. While photos of celebrities tend to show perfect after-baby bodies, ordinary mothers up and down the land can struggle with flabby tummies, weight that doesn't seem to shift, stretch marks and saggy bosoms. For the vast majority of mums it is going to take time to shift the bodily changes – and for some women the changes become more permanent. Whatever stage you are at, remember to be kind to yourself. You grew a whole other little human being inside of you, which is incredible!

Emotional changes can be harder to spot. Baby blues often occur for the first few weeks, when we seem to be able to cry at anything and everything, but there can be other emotional changes too. If you had a difficult or traumatic birth, a premature birth, a prolonged or a very quick birth, a medical emergency or your baby was taken to special care, you could find yourself struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Please talk to your health visitor or GP (or even your toddler group leader) if you feel this way. Do remember, though, that it is a perfectly understandable reaction to going through a scary or difficult event.



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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Some parents can experience depression or anxiety after having a baby. These feelings are very common. Please speak up if you're feeling this way, as there is so much support out there in person and online. Some parents feel low when they're out of routine, especially if they're on leave from work. But remember you are more than just your job, and your identity is more than your work. It is, of course, OK to miss work too – and to return to work if and when it's right for your family.

Some people experience spiritual changes. Perhaps you used to get up early to have some quiet time in prayer or meditation, or perhaps you used to love worshipping, but now you struggle to get out of the house, you feel all your prayers are about helping your baby to sleep and you can't engage with your spiritual community the way you used to. Again please be reassured that this is a common response. Why not reach out to other mums in your church or speak to a trusted leader? You could ask if there is an informal group for parents during the week, where the kids can just play and you can pray and support one another. Alternatively try using the crèche, maybe go on your own sometimes or listen to podcasts when you can't make it to church.

## Helping yourself

Here are some suggestions about what you can do to help yourself feel a little bit more like you again.

- **Talk to other people.** Be honest when you do speak to someone, as there's no need to pretend or feel ashamed. You may well find that just talking about how you feel makes a big difference.
- **Sleep when you can.** Try to rebuild your energy. Don't be afraid of asking friends or family to help, or to take turns with your partner to have a Saturday morning lie-in if possible.
- **Eat well.** Try to get a good balance of healthy food and simple treats.
- **Get outside as often as you can.** Natural daylight really helps to make us feel better because of the increase of Vitamin D levels it provides. Studies have also shown that being outside elevates mood and concentration levels.
- **Exercise really helps.** You don't need to jump straight into a high impact gym class; gentle swimming, walking with your baby in the pushchair or sling, or an exercise class especially for parents are great options. Regular exercise releases hormones that are natural mood-enhancers.
- **Talk to your GP or health visitor.** If you are struggling with low mood or anxiety, there is plenty of professional help out there so don't be afraid, or ashamed, of accessing it.
- **Get together with other parents.** Meeting with parents in a similar life stage is so helpful, as you can support each other while you all face the same issues. Why not suggest meeting in smaller groups for coffee in each other's houses regularly?



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