

The New Normal

By VIANCA T. MALICK

When we think of starting a family, we often only really think about the three trimesters of pregnancy. However, there are other parts of the parenting process. The time after birth when your baby is adjusting to life on the outside, known as the “fourth trimester,” and the time when new mothers return to work, known as the “fifth trimester.”¹

The ‘fifth trimester’? It’s the time when new mothers, just months after delivery, are going back to work but often before they feel emotionally and physically ready to return . . . [It’s] the first few months back at work, whether women return after a week or after six months of leave, whether they work in blue collar or white collar professions, whether they have paid leave, or are like the majority of Americans who work at companies that don’t offer any paid leave.²

My husband and I welcomed our first child back in July. As I neared the end of my maternity leave, I had mixed feelings. Part of me was excited. Our daughter would be starting daycare, so her care and development would no longer be mainly my responsibility. I was ready to put my brain to work, “lawyer” again, and return to a former sense of self.

Another part of me felt guilty. Before having our daughter, I had certain expectations of what my maternity leave would look like. I knew it would be difficult. I expected to not get much sleep and for things like showers and hot meals to be a luxury. What I did not

expect was a baby that refused to nap, even as a newborn, or the added job of having to exclusively pump, which ate up multiple hours a day between the physical pumping, storing of the milk, cleaning of all the parts, etc. I felt like I needed a vacation after my maternity leave, but felt guilty that I was looking forward to the break daycare would give my husband and me.

Despite my mixed feelings, I felt ready. A large part of that was due to the fact that I had six months of maternity leave and, while unpaid, we were able to maneuver our finances to cover my missing income for that length of time. Over the last two years many of my friends had welcomed their first children and many of them did not have the luxury we had of having more than a few months of maternity leave. Many had to put their little ones in daycare around three months old. As I saw our six month old daughter start, I could not imagine her starting any earlier. At three months, your child is still not very independent, only just received their first round of vaccinations, and is

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likely going through a sleep regression. Not to mention—they are so little! However, placing a child in daycare as young as six weeks old is a reality for many parents in the United States.

The United States is the only industrialized nation with no national paid maternity leave.³ The federal Family and Medical Leave Act allows parents to take up to twelve (12) week of unpaid leave upon the birth of a child.⁴ However, the national average takes only about ten (10) weeks⁵ with approximately one in fourteen workers who qualify forgoing their leave entirely because they cannot afford to take unpaid leave.⁶ “Nearly half of workers (46 percent) are not even guaranteed unpaid, job-protected leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act.”⁷ “This federal policy failure leaves more than 100 million people—80 percent of U.S. workers—without paid time off after the birth or adoption of a child.”⁸

Regardless of the length of your maternity leave, the “fifth trimester” will be a

challenge. However, there are plenty of resources out there to help ease the transition. Below is some advice I have found useful as I entered my fifth trimester.

1. Take your time. “Resist taking your emotional temperature during your first few weeks back on the job. Returning to work after parental leave is a process.”⁹ It will take time to establish a new “normal” and regain your balance with the added duties of being both an attorney and a parent.

2. Embrace your career. Returning to work can provide fulfilment beyond motherhood.¹⁰ Enjoy the time to yourself returning to work may provide. Personally, I liked getting out of the house in nice clothes again and drinking a hot cup of coffee.

3. Seek support from others.¹¹ Whether it is childcare support from family

and friends to give you a break or seeking advice from other parents at work. There is no shame in seeking help.

4. Be flexible with yourself and your expectations. Understand adjustments will need to be made along the way as you figure out your new “normal.”¹² ■

NOTES

- 1 Kelly Wallace, *The “Fifth Trimester”: When New Moms Return to Work*, CNN (Apr. 6, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/06/health/fifth-trimester-working-mom-resources-parenting/index.html>.
- 2 *Id.*
- 3 *Id.*; see also, *Maternity Leave in the U.S. vs. Other Countries: A Deep Dive on Global Standards*, THE LACTATION NETWORK (Jan. 3, 2025), <https://lactationnetwork.com/blog/maternity-leave-in-the-us-vs-other-countries/> (citing Sarah Combs, *Paid Leave Is Essential For Healthy Moms and Babies*, NAT’L PARTNERSHIP FOR WOMEN & FAMILIES (May 2021), <https://nationalpartnership.org/report/paid-leave-is-essential-for/>).

- 4 *Maternity Leave in the U.S. vs. Other Countries: A Deep Dive on Global Standards*, THE LACTATION NETWORK (Jan. 3, 2025), <https://lactationnetwork.com/blog/maternity-leave-in-the-us-vs-other-countries/>.
- 5 *Id.*
- 6 Sarah Combs, *Paid Leave Is Essential For Healthy Moms and Babies*, NAT’L PARTNERSHIP FOR WOMEN & FAMILIES (May 2021), <https://nationalpartnership.org/report/paid-leave-is-essential-for/>.
- 7 *Id.*
- 8 *Id.*
- 9 Rebecca Knight, *How to Return to Work After Taking Parental Leave*, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW (August 2, 2019), <https://hbr.org/2019/08/how-to-return-to-work-after-taking-parental-leave>.
- 10 See generally, Rachel Spink, *Returning From Maternity Leave as a Lawyer – A Guide*, LinkedIn (Oct. 30, 2024), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/returning-from-maternity-leave-lawyer-guide-rachel-spink-s08fe>.
- 11 See Rebecca Knight, *How to Return to Work After Taking Parental Leave*, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW (August 2, 2019), <https://hbr.org/2019/08/how-to-return-to-work-after-taking-parental-leave>.
- 12 See *id.*



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