

## Book Review

**The Mommy Plan: Restoring Your Post-Pregnancy Body, Naturally, using Women's Traditional Wisdom** by Valerie Lynn, 2012. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Percetakan Lenang Istimewa Sdn Bhd. ISBN: 978-1-4675-2115-4

*The Mommy Plan* is an important, information-filled book, focused on helping Western women and their families adapt traditional postpartum practices into their own postpartum care. It is also an easily-digestible read.

Valerie Lynn writes from both her own experience, and her own research. As an American woman married to an Australian, she has spent the majority of the past twenty-plus years living overseas, mostly in Malaysia. Lynn writes that she and her husband decided to spend a year living in Lynn's home state of New Jersey in 2007, where she gave birth to a son. Having previously learned about the postpartum practices of Southeast Asia, Lynn set out to look for postpartum recovery products and services in New Jersey that she had commonly seen in Malaysia, and found nothing comparable. Lynn found this surprising, and disappointing in her own journey into motherhood.

The new family soon returned to live in Malaysia, where Lynn also became curious about the reasons for the high rates of postpartum mood disorders found in the United States and some other industrialized countries, in comparison to the very low rates found in Malaysia. Lynn's research revealed that well over a million women in the United States (15-20%) are diagnosed with a postpartum mood disorder each year, for which antidepressants are commonly prescribed. In contrast, 3-4% of Malaysian women are diagnosed with a postpartum mood disorder each year. Postpartum mood disorders can interrupt the process of attachment and bonding between the newborn and the mother, and prescribed medications may have side effects, and will pass through breastmilk to the infant.

In searching for the reasons that might underlie these statistics, Lynn narrowed her research down to two main cultural differences found in Malaysia – better family support, and specific, traditional postpartum recovery guidelines that have been passed down generationally.

Additionally, Lynn found that nearly all the Malaysian pregnant women she spoke with had a postpartum plan organized by the end of the second trimester. The collectivist cultural view of an expectant mother planning for copious amounts of help in the first six to eight weeks postpartum is not only accepted, but deeply honored in Malaysia.

In contrast, women in the United States often live farther away from family members, and the individualistic cultural view supports independence, not reaching out for help. Often women are expected to be back at work soon after giving birth; the United States is still the only developed nation that doesn't guarantee paid maternity leave. Also, very little information is given to the average woman about ways to help recover from the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Often the information provided to American women is conflictual, or focused solely on caring for the baby, leaving new mothers and their families feeling confused and under-resourced in the postpartum period.

Lynn's book provides the reader with a plan to help prepare a new mother and her family for optimum postpartum recovery. Although no exact cause has been found as a link to all perinatal mood disorders, factors such as hormone imbalances, lack of sleep, previous mental health issues, and inadequate social support are known to predispose some women. Lynn's book is not meant to make the case that The Mommy Plan will either fully protect against or eradicate a postpartum mood disorder. However, by addressing some of the factors that may play a role in postpartum mood disorders, Lynn offers age-old guidance on how to best set a new mother and her family up for peak postpartum healing, with the hope that this will lessen the likelihood of serious physical or emotional issues occurring.

The detailed Mommy Plan includes specific dietary tips, such as eating certain organic foods that are warm, versus cold, hot, or containing pesticides, since the woman's post-birth body is believed to be sensitive and in a cold state from the work of pregnancy and birth, and the loss of blood and other fluids. Several recipes are included, along with helpful spices and herbs, and those that should be avoided. The Mommy Plan includes suggestions around resting and bonding with the baby, massages and tummy/torso wraps for both mother and baby, gentle recovery exercises, and scheduling help with chores and cooking.

There is also a less-detailed Daddy Plan, which helps fathers/partners see both how their role as a support person is unparalleled, and how partners need and can find additional support, helping the entire family system through this tremendous rite of passage. Additionally, some of the end chapters of the book include information about the roles of doulas, midwives, hypnobirthing, and the placenta, both prior to, and after birth.

Lynn clearly cares about the health of mothers. On page one, just below the copyright, she issues an “Extra Precaution for Mommies.” It reads, “The cover of this book has been sealed with a layer of non-toxic oil, like that used in the printing of children’s books, so a Mommy’s or Daddy’s skin doesn’t absorb the toxic chemical contained in the ink used for the printing cover. The colors aren’t as pretty,” she states, “but I was more concerned about reducing the chemical exposure to anyone reading this book.”

Lynn has also garnered the support of others who care about new families. The forward was written by Ibu Robin Lim, CPM, birth activist, and accomplished author, who was named the 2011-2012 CNN Hero of the Year. “Ibu (Mother) Robin,” as she is known, has endorsed Lynn’s book, “because postpartum is so important, and yet there is so little information available to enlighten us about this most precious time of bonding, breastfeeding, and healing.”

As a mother of two children born at home, and a psychotherapist who works with expectant and new families, I would also highly recommend this postpartum book to all expectant families. Though recovery from my first birth experience was more challenging, we planned more thoroughly for increased support after our second child, including hiring an Ayurvedic postpartum doula. The warming foods and massages the doula provided made a tremendous difference in the length of my recovery, and the increased support in terms of child care for our older daughter, and assisting my husband with some chores and food preparation, helped our entire family unit regain our energy more rapidly than after our first was born.

The Mommy Plan is easy to adapt to varying needs, and written in a way that any woman, and her support team can quickly find what they are looking for in the book. Whether a family is currently recovering from an unexpected Cesarean birth, or is just now deciding whether to have their baby in a hospital, birth center, or at home, The Mommy Plan provides solid, time-tested advice on creating a strategy to help the new mother and her family recover in a way that optimizes physical and emotional well-being.

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