

Sharing Space

The Birth of a Mother: A Psychological Transformation

Kate Babetin

Abstract: There is no experience in a woman's life that is more impactful, all-encompassing, and life-altering than becoming a mother. The transformation from woman to mother is a psychologically-profound experience that both overlaps and is separate from the physical experience of becoming a mother. This article aims to explore the process of the psychological birth of a mother by discussing: the shift in identity that takes place; why understanding the psychological experience of mothers matters; the various stages of transformation; the factors that influence the transformation; and the ways in which becoming a mother affects a woman's identity, relationships, and career.

Keywords: motherhood, identity, transformation, postpartum adjustment

... the twilight zone between past and future that is the precarious world of transformation within the chrysalis. Part of us is looking back, yearning for the magic we have lost; part is glad to say good-bye to our chaotic past; part looks ahead with whatever courage we can muster; part is excited by the changing potential; part sits stone-still not daring to look either way. Individuals who consciously accept the chrysalis...have accepted a life/death paradox, a paradox which returns in a different form at each new spiral of growth. (Woodman, 1985, p. 14)

There is no experience in a woman's life that is more impactful, profound, all-encompassing, and life-altering than becoming a mother. The transformation from woman to mother has a deep, lasting impact on a woman's psyche. When a woman desires to have a child, or becomes pregnant, those around her tend to focus on her physical experience of motherhood, and of course, the wellness of her unborn baby. The birth of a mother, as every woman who has experienced this transformation knows, is about much more than the major biological changes and physical events

Kate Babetin is a Registered Psychotherapist in private practice in Ancaster, ON. She is trained in Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy and has more than a decade of experience working in the mental health field with children, youth, and adults.

that take place within her body. Becoming a mother is a psychologically-profound transformation experience that both overlaps and is separate from the physical experience of becoming a mother. Life with a child redefines a woman's sense of identity in ways she may have never expected. For some women, the metamorphosis into mother is smooth. For others, each phase of change offers great challenges. Some mothers are born the moment they first desire to have a child of their own. Other mothers are not fully born until weeks, months, or even years after the physical birth of their first child. The timing, experience and process of the psychological birth of the "motherhood mindset" (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998, p.3) varies from woman to woman. In this article, I explore the psychological process of becoming a mother, including: the shift in identity that takes place; why understanding the psychological experience of mothers matters; the various stages of transformation; the factors that influence the transformation; and the ways in which becoming a mother affects a woman's identity, relationships, and career.

In my time of writing this article, I spoke to many of my fellow mothers within my personal circle of family, friends, and community. I asked some of these women to share their experiences of motherhood with me for the purpose of this article. In sharing their stories, I have protected their privacy by changing names and omitting identifying information.

The Heroine's Journey

Since the early days of psychoanalysis and the impact of Freud, who "was unable to see women as human beings who could provide their own universal norms" (Jennings Walstedt, 1976, p. 2) there has been a view that motherhood creates nothing more than a small variation to the organization of a woman's psyche. "No one thought that a woman's mental life could fundamentally change with the arrival of a baby" (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998, p. 5). This couldn't be farther from fact. Dr. Louanne Brizendine, author of *The Female Brain*, writes, "Motherhood changes you because it literally alters a woman's *brain*—structurally, functionally, and in many ways, irreversibly" (Brizendine, 2006, p. 95). The process of becoming mother is a rite of passage, according to Brenner (2014):

[Pregnancy](#) and childbirth are quintessential initiations for women. Far beyond the chronological significance of nine months, the pregnant woman undergoes an archetypal experience equivalent to the hero's/heroine's journey. It is an experience that transcends time. Passing through this initiation, women contact The Mother (the primal Feminine archetype) and the realm of women's mysteries. Every modality of being is engaged: physical changes, a shift in status, a movement to a higher level of consciousness, and a [spiritual](#) unfolding. The experience offers women the ability to access and expand their self-knowledge. (para. 2)

The change from woman to mother is the most profound psychological transformation that a woman can experience in her lifetime (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998). It is not some simple variation of being. One of the mothers I surveyed, wrote about her own transformation process:

Becoming a mother completely changed my identity. I once described myself as a professional, wife, friend, sister, daughter.... And then I lost that sense of self. I was no longer a career-focused professional. I had no time to be a wife or a friend. I had become a mom and that was all I could eat, breathe, or think. I was no longer a person in her own right and I didn't have time to mind. As a new maternal side emerged, I put all of my energy and time into being the most informed and best mother that I could be. (Adrianna)

This psychological transformation is not something that a new mother can ever be fully prepared for. Even when a woman knows it will happen, it can still be shocking and agonizing. Many women find themselves feeling lost and uncertain about who they are in a time they are frequently told should be the best time of their lives. This can leave new mothers feeling there must be something terribly wrong with them. The reality is, losing oneself in the trial by fire that is new motherhood is very common. There is a whole new part of you that you need to get to know—your baby. Your identity now includes another being. As a mother, your identity is “cloven in two, [your] independence cut by half” (Wolf, 2001, p. 60). Your personal needs and desires are no longer your top priority. “You are no longer a free agent in the world, responsible ultimately to yourself. Your new tasks as a mother are irrevocable” (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998, p. 14). The task of integrating your old and new identities can be an emotional roller coaster. One new mother I spoke to said:

I don't think I was able to appreciate the magnitude of the change in my life until it actually happened. People tell you how much life changes but you can't fully understand it until you're there. I was also surprised that even though I wanted children and was thrilled to become a mother, how much I missed my 'old' life. And I still often do. (Dawn)

Why a Mother's Transformation Process Matters

Understanding the psychology of mothers is essential in that the psychological transformation that takes place has an emotional impact on the children whom they are raising. In a recent article, Dr. Alexandra Sacks (2017) writes about the importance of studying “matrescence”:

The process of becoming a mother, which anthropologists call ‘matrescence,’ has been largely unexplored in the medical community. Instead of focusing on the woman's identity transition, more research is focused on how the baby turns out. But a woman's story, in addition to how her psychology impacts her parenting, is important to examine... (para. 4)

When a woman has a better understanding of the psychological process of becoming a mother, it can impact her children in a positive way. With a greater awareness of her own process, she may be better able to tune into the emotional needs of her child (Sacks, 2017). While of course both mothers and fathers go through a transformation process when entering parenthood, the journey is especially impactful for mothers because we have the unique experience of the intensely personal mother-child bond that is formed through the many months of growing a child within our bodies (Tsabary, 2010).

Labor Pains

The experience of being born as a mother is at once heart-opening, ecstatic, joyful, confusing, painful, and at times terrifying. This is an “inner, often private experience” (Stern & Bruschwiler-Stern, 1998, p. 3). Much like the stages of physical birth, the psychological birth of a mother includes its own labor pains. However, the labor in this process is not physical, but emotional. The duration, ease or discomfort of this emotional labor process varies from woman to woman. While the physical birth of a child has a defining moment, the exact time of the mother’s birth may not be so clear. Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern (1998) state:

This motherhood mindset is not born at the moment the baby gives its first cry. The birth of a mother does not take place in one dramatic, defining moment, but gradually emerges from the cumulative work of the many months that precede and follow the actual birth of the baby. (p. 3)

As the emotional labor begins, so does the painful process of leaving behind the woman she once was. As a new part of her is being birthed, the pre-motherhood identity begins to undergo a death process. Many of the women in my community spoke to me about feeling that they had lost themselves in the process of becoming a mother. Our culture doesn’t allow much space for women to mourn that loss. We are simply expected to be grateful for a baby with good health and an underpaid maternity leave from work to adjust to our new life. In her book *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (2001), Naomi Wolf writes, “the culture often insists on our keeping the full range of our feelings and discoveries a secret” (p. 2). She discusses her concerns about the positive psychology and “happy talk” that is so much a part of the literature available for pregnant women.

But as every woman who has experienced it herself knows, the transition from woman to mother is not all butterflies and rainbows. There is a darker side lurking in the all-too-often unacknowledged shadow mother. Positive psychology culture doesn’t allow women the space to express their difficulties with new motherhood. Additionally, many women find when they do express their struggles, they are quickly labeled with postpartum depression and handed a prescription for anti-depressants. This message says *your struggles aren’t normal, and there must be something terribly wrong with you if you aren’t basking in the glory of motherhood*. Postpartum depression is a very real mental health concern for somewhere between 7.5—15.5% of Canadian women (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2014), and it is important that it’s diagnosed and treated appropriately; however, just because a woman is struggling with motherhood does not automatically mean that she is experiencing postpartum depression. In exploring this, Sacks (2017) writes, “Women are often left with a false binary: They either have postpartum depression or they should breeze through the transition to motherhood” (para. 21).

Stages of Labor: Preparation, Active Labor, Adaptation

In their book, *The Birth of Mother* (1998), Drs. Daniel Stern and Nadia Bruschweiler-Stern state:

The process of giving birth to the motherhood mindset progresses through phases. The new identity requires that you first prepare yourself mentally for the change, that you then undergo much emotional labor in bringing forth the new aspects of yourself, and finally that you work hard to integrate the changes into the rest of your life. (p. 20)

Preparation

We might compare the preparation phase of emotional labor to the *early labor* stage of physical labor. The contractions are starting, but we're nowhere near time to push. The first step in the preparation stage is making the decision to become a mother. When a woman consciously decides she would like to become a mother she is opening herself up to allow the mother archetype to enter her life. Vangie Bergum, author of *Woman to Mother: A Transformation* (1989), writes:

The opening to the possibility of being a mother, the creation of space in one's life for a child, begins with the thoughtful decision...The decision, including both thought and action, is the beginning of the change. With the coming to a...decision about children in their lives, women begin their transformation to mothers. (p. 51)

Biology can also play a part in bringing on the early stages of emotional labor of the motherhood mindset. When a woman holds a baby of perhaps a friend or family member, the pheromones carried by the infant's head can ignite the female brain to produce oxytocin—the love hormone. For some women, this experience can lead to “baby lust”—a strong desire for a child of one's own (Brizendine, 2006, p. 97). The next step in the preparation process is conception. Jungian analyst, Raina Maria Kohler (2013), writes that within hours of conception the the mother archetype is activated:

A wonderful example is the activation which happens a few hours after conception. The zygote, which has already divided several times, ‘learns,’ i.e. receives a chemical signal from the mother that tells it that it is situated in the fallopian tube. This signal activates a certain gene in the zygote to produce and release a hormone into the fallopian tube and the mother's body saying, in substance: ‘Hey Mom, I am here, please get ready to receive me in your womb and prepare to support my growth for the next nine months.’ It is, so to speak, the first incarnation of the mother archetype, where the archetype is the genetically available pattern of communication between mother and child and child and mother, i.e. a very old typical pattern in the human race; and the incarnation is the two signals passing from the mother's fallopian tube to the embryo and then the hormonal signal from the embryo to the mother. (para. 12)

Kendra, one of the mothers I interviewed, described her experience as follows:

I felt like a mother the minute the second line appeared on the pregnancy test. Being a mother was all I had ever wanted in my life and in that moment I felt like my whole life's hopes and dreams were realized. I knew that baby and loved it fiercely. Finding out the gender added another layer as he now had an identity, a name, a picture of what we would share one day. But in my heart and soul I was a mom long before I held my little boy in my arms. I carried him in my heart for nine months and I was his mommy.

So, we can see that while the woman's body begins to change and adapt to the new life growing within her womb, "her mind actively prepares the way for her new identity" (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998, p. 20).

In the months following conception, as her belly swells and the baby takes up more and more space within her body, the woman's identity as she knows it continues to transform. She may begin to question aspects of herself, her beliefs, lifestyle choices, relationships, and her career. A pregnant mother will likely find that her identity comes into question as she awakens to the new reality that her life, just like her body, is no longer solely her own. Erich Neumann (1955) explains this as follows:

First, and foremost, the woman experiences her transformative character naturally and unreflectingly in pregnancy, in her relation to the growth of the child, and in childbearing. Here woman is the organ and instrument of the transformation of both her own structure and that of the child within her and outside her. Hence, for the woman the transformative character—even that of her own transformation—is from the beginning connected to the problem of the *thou* relationship....The growth of the foetus already brings about a change of the woman's personality. (p. 31)

As her baby continues to grow, a woman's progesterone levels skyrocket during pregnancy. This produces a calming effect on her nervous system and helps counteract the flood of cortisol and other stress hormones that are being produced by the fetus and placenta. This results in a general calmness of the pregnant woman but causes her to become hypervigilant about the health and safety of both herself and her unborn baby (Brizendine, 2006). Women who may have been fiercely independent prior to pregnancy, and even early on in their pregnancy, may "experience a changed sense of themselves and their need for others. They begin to feel vulnerable and more willing to accept the attentive support that is offered them" (Bergum, 1989, p. 60). In order to protect her child, a woman will adapt and accept her need for others. The protective *mother bear* archetype is already becoming a part of the pregnant woman's psyche.

Hope Edleman, in her book *Motherless Daughters: A Legacy of Loss* (1994), writes about pregnancy, "It's a natural time of dependency....and an expectant mother has a strong need for security and support" (p. 246). Generally, a pregnant woman will seek out this security and support equally from both her partner and her mother (Edleman, 1994). A pregnant woman's relationship with her mother can be especially important at this time in her life. Without a mother or mother-figure to guide her, build up her self-confidence, and offer words of encouragement, a pregnant woman may struggle with feelings of loneliness or uncertainty

(Edleman, 1994). Ideally, a mother-to-be will also feel safe and supported by her medical or midwifery team. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. The impact of lack of compassionate medical care can lead to adverse outcomes. Wolf (2001) states:

...failure of compassion on the part of the medical personnel...this lack of compassion actually has a medical impact. Your doctor's or midwife's or medical institution's level of compassion, and the amount of control you feel you have as a pregnant woman, can directly affect the physical outcome of your birth and your recovery from it. (p. 21)

As the due date approaches, most women will find that their external focus has shifted. When out running errands, for example, a woman notices babies and pregnant women everywhere (Bergum, 1989). She may find herself observing other mothers with their children, noticing how they interact with the child, what they are eating, what they are feeding the child, or their facial expressions and tone of voice. Whether conscious of it or not, she is beginning to learn how, or how not, to act as a mother in this world (Bergum, 1989). By this point, most women have created a fantasy story about who their baby will be and what life with the baby will be like. Then comes the birth of the baby, and reality.

Active Labor

While it may seem logical to assume that with the birth of the child also comes the definitive birth of the mother, this is not always so. Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern (1998) write, "The actual birth experience is still part of the preparation phase, and may give rise to a physical mother but not a psychological one" (p. 21). The birth of the child marks the ending of the preparation stage and the beginning of what we might call *active labor* of the mother's emotional birthing process.

As a new mother soaks up the first moments with the little being that has already forever changed her life, she will be "facing at the same time an irrevocably lost past and an undefined future" (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998, p. 68). The metamorphosis that takes place over the next weeks to months is wrought with contrasting emotions. Vangie Bergum (1989) proposes that the physical pain a woman experiences during the birth of her child may be an important part to a woman's transformation to mother. She writes:

To have experienced birthing pain offers the possibilities of self-knowledge, knowledge of limitation and capabilities, knowledge of new life as mother, and of a woman's place in the mysterious cycle of human life: birth, death, and rebirth. As women give birth to children, they, in a sense, birth themselves. (p. 82)

With the physical labor and birth of the child now complete, the waves of emotional labor increase in frequency and intensity. The first few months following the birth of the child are often referred to as the fourth trimester—or as a dear friend of mine jokingly calls it, the first 100 days of darkness. These early months of motherhood are often experienced as a "savagely difficult adjustment period" (Wolf, 2001, p. 3) by many new mothers. There is so much to learn so quickly and the pressure can be exhausting and anxiety-producing. We are thrust into this new role. We have no choice but to learn how to slow down and surrender to the

process (Northrup, 2005). The woman we once were has died, but the mother is not yet fully born. “We know we aren’t the same woman we were pre-birth, but neither have we articulated who we are post-birth. Consequently, we get lost in our role as mothers” (Tsbary, 2010, p. 119).

This is when most women feel the full impact of their new responsibility as a mother. It can be a beautiful, shocking, and frightening when a woman comes to the realization that this tiny person is now one hundred percent dependent on her. Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern (1998) write, “This reality is the single most compelling raw fact of a new mother’s experience” (p. 95). Many of the women I spoke to talked about feeling the weight of responsibility being at home with a new baby, including how caring for their babies and carrying out their new duties made them feel more like a mother. One woman wrote:

I don’t think it felt real until after I had her. Even then, in the hospital, it felt clinical. When we got home and I started to care for her independently—co-sleeping, feedings during the night, diapers etc., I felt more like a mother. It was gradual for me, with every new day getting to know her, I felt more like a mother. (Michelle)

Yet even when a woman is struggling to adapt to her new role, she is experiencing profound, intense feelings of love like she has never experienced before. The physical birth of the child has opened an emotional window. The rush of postpartum hormones explodes through her body, amplifying all the emotions she is experiencing. “The fourth trimester is a time when you are likely to experience a degree of emotional openness, rawness, and lability different from anything you have ever felt” (Northrup, 2005, p. 120). These intense feelings of love and other emotions are often an essential part of her new identity as a mother.

I started to feel like a real mother many weeks after the arrival of the baby. The love for that child as I got to truly know her made me feel more like a mother. It was knowing that child that made me feel more in the role of mother. (Maria)

The birth itself and the moments after delivery play an essential role in creating the loving feelings that help progress the emotional labor of the mother. In his book *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (1981), psychiatrist Thomas Verny, one of the founders of the Association of Pre-and Perinatal Psychology, states that numerous studies have shown if a woman is able to physically bond with her child in the minutes and hours immediately after birth, she is more likely to become a better mother. They are “more attentive, enthusiastic and supportive” (Verny, 1981, p. 150). The separation of infant and mother that sometimes happens in the case of ill or premature babies can have a “devastating psychological effect on their mothers” (Verny, 1981, p. 149). Of course, this does not mean that mothers who weren’t able to physically bond with their infants immediately post-birth will turn out to be poor, unloving mothers. It’s more that the mothers who do have that immediate bonding time with their baby may have a head start (Verny, 1981).

“Normal Crazy” – Ambivalence, Anger and Loneliness

As they go about their new daily routine of feedings, diapers, and praying the baby sleeps, most new mothers begin to feel a roller coaster of emotions beyond the

biologically explained baby blues. One moment there is pure joy and love in her heart, and the next can be filled with feelings of overwhelm and anger. Ambivalence, anger, and loneliness are all part of what Angela McBride, in her book *The Growth and Development of Mothers* (1973), refers to as “normal crazy” (p. 39). Despite society’s message that new mothers should be blissed out and enjoying every second of their newborns, the reality is that tumultuous feelings around becoming a parent are completely normal. For fear of being seen as a bad mother, “fourth-trimester mothers are often reluctant to acknowledge in themselves [their] anger, ambivalence, and loneliness. It is important to realize that these emotions, just like feelings of joy and happiness, are part our humanness” (Krause Eheart & Martel, 1983, p. 46).

It is normal for new mothers to feel a bit crazy. Accepting the paradox of motherhood is essential. We must learn to recognize and accept the shadow side of the mother, for every mother certainly has one. When new mothers deny this shadow side and try to push their difficult feelings away, they may begin to experience what many mothers refer to as *mom guilt*. However, what they need to understand is that “nothing in the world has the power to make them feel happy all the time; anything or anyone capable of causing happiness is also capable of causing sorrow, confusion, and anger, and it is here that ambivalence comes in” (Krause Eheart & Martel, 1983, p. 48). Being home, tied down to a colicky baby, on the baby’s schedule, can be boring and depressing. The sudden change from a social, work environment to a secluded life with your baby can be lonely. Waking up to feed a baby every few hours can make you feel exhausted and angry. You may love your child with a greater love than you have ever experienced before, but you miss the life you once had and long for just a moment of that freedom again. Some of the women I spoke with expressed their struggles with anger, loneliness, and ambivalence:

I heard once that being a mother is thinking about running away and in your escape plans you include your child, who was the initial reason why you wanted to run away. That’s exactly how I feel. Sometimes I am tired, but I cannot imagine, even for a second, my life without my son. (Tatianna)

The experience of having very little control over my time bothers me and although I theoretically knew I wouldn’t have a lot of me-time and that things would take longer, *experiencing* it is challenging. I have also been surprised by the amount of anger and frustration I experience as a mother. Sure, there are a lot of cuddles now that my son is a toddler, but there is a LOT of hair pulling, hitting, food throwing, kicking, and messing about that I have a hard time breathing through. (Jessica)

Breastfeeding was hard, but the lack of sleep was (and still is) a killer. Loneliness was also a huge part of becoming a new mom that I did not expect at all. I longed for some sort of communal living like they have in foreign countries. Just doing the day-to-day chores with other moms would have been nice. (Jessica)

The Lack of a Village

Another key factor in the ease or struggle of a woman’s emotional labor and acceptance of “normal crazy” is the presence, or lack of a village to support her through her transition to life with a baby. Dr. Christine Northrup, author of

Mother Daughter Wisdom (2005), says that as mothers are nurturing and taking care of their children they need an “outer placenta” – a community that can support, nurture, and replenish them (p. 33). For the most part, North American women are “profoundly under-supported—by their families, their workplaces, and the larger society—in coping with the strains of new motherhood” (Wolf, 2001, p. 5). This is where I see an urgent need for change in our society. I resonate with Naomi Wolf (2001) when she writes:

I believe that the myth about the ease and naturalness of mothering—the ideal of the effortlessly ever-giving mother—is propped up, polished, and promoted as a way to keep women from thinking clearly and negotiating forcefully about what they need from their partners and from society at large in order to mother well, without having to sacrifice themselves in the process. (p. 7)

We were never meant to raise children alone. Human beings evolved in “allomaternal” environments (Brizendine, 2006, p. 114). Mothers desperately need a village to help them raise children. I heard this message repeatedly from my fellow mother friends, family, and community members. “New mothers need some kind of validation, encouragement, witnessing, and support, specifically from another woman who is more experienced in mothering than she” (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998, p. 130). This support is not just about having someone help do a few loads of laundry, drop off a meal, or cuddle the baby while the mother takes a much-needed nap. It is much more than that. New mothers need an “affirming matrix” (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998, p. 133), a sisterhood of fellow mothers—more experienced mothers—that can help surround the new mother with a psychologically supportive environment. One friend shared this about her experience:

My village consisted of my husband and mother...My mom was indispensable with not only the physical requirements of taking care of an infant—feeding, changing, comforting—but she helped me emotionally as well. She was a calm soothing presence in times when I was overwhelmed, frustrated, tired, or just had the baby blues. She was reassuring, encouraging, and gave me the confidence that I needed to be the best mom that I could. I can’t imagine going through those first few weeks and months without her. (Sharon)

When a new mother has this kind of support it “not only decreases her stress but correlates with more positive behaviors with, and attitude toward, her child” (Cozolino, 2006, p. 202). Without a reliable, emotionally-supportive environment, mothers can become anxious and insecure, and their babies can exhibit signs of depression. Creating a culture that provides mothers with a proper village of support is essential to ending the cycle of anxious mothers and anxious babies (Brizendine, 2006).

New mothers tend to seek out this village support from close friends, family members, and of course, their own mothers. When a woman gives birth, it sets off in her body the same cascade of hormones that she experienced as a baby at the time of her own birth. This activates the same primal need for one’s mother that was there when that person was born (Northrup, 2005). Dr. Christine Northrup (2005) writes:

When you give birth, a part of you longs for connection with your own mother. The bonding circuits that laid down the foundation of your relationship with our mother get reactivated because the same hormonal milieu has now been re-created. Just as when you were born, every cell in your body cries out for your mother—it's primal. This is true even if your relationship with her is poor, or she's no longer living....This biological need for one's mother is so strong that it can sometimes heal the relationship between an estranged mother and her daughter. (p. 148)

This is why so many women find that the person they trust the most, feel the safest with, and desire the most validation and reassurance from is their own mother. This is often true even when the mother-daughter relationship has been difficult. If the mother-daughter relationship is too strained or is absent altogether, a woman will seek out a substitute mother-figure to mentor her in the ways of motherhood.

Transcending the Past – Becoming the “Good Enough Mother”

With their own mother on their mind, many women approach motherhood as an opportunity to become the “good-enough mother” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 13) that they desired, but perhaps never experienced. Sacks (2017) writes:

...becoming a mother provides an opportunity for a do-over. In a way, a woman gets to re-experience her own childhood in the act of parenting, repeating what was good, and trying to improve what was not. If a woman had a difficult relationship with her mother, she may try to be the mother she wishes she'd had. (para. 9)

Since it is well known that women epigenetically inherit their mother's maternal behavior (Brizendine, 2006) and attachment style (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998), it is essential for new mothers to maintain a certain level of self-awareness if they wish to transcend the past and stop repeating history. “Inattentive mothering behavior can be passed on for three generations unless most of the beneficial changes in the environment happen before puberty” (Brizendine, 2006, p. 110). This is why, according to Shelfali Tsabary in her book *The Conscious Parent* (2010), as mothers we must be conscious of our childhood wounds and how we express them. If we are to interrupt the intergenerational transfer of emotional and psychological pain to our children and grandchildren, we must, as mothers, be deeply conscious of who we are and how we impact our children. Personally, I have found this to be my biggest challenge as a mother. Raising two children is the greatest ongoing lesson in “safe and effective use of self” that anyone could possibly experience. This challenge can be even greater for mothers with daughters because mothers tend to identify and project themselves onto their daughters more so than they would their sons, who are viewed as male opposites (Edleman, 1994). In her efforts to interrupt the cycle of pain that is passed from one generation to the next, a woman is healing not only her own wounds, but also the wounds of all her female ancestors that came before her.

The Pressure to Be Perfect - Embodying the Archetype

When a woman begins to experience the challenges of motherhood, she may come to a place where she is suddenly able to understand her own mother, and the ways she feels her mother was not good enough, from a different point of view. She may begin to ask herself, what exactly is a good mother? We live in a culture that sends the message that mothers must be all-loving, ever available, always happy, and always put their children's need first. Expecting a woman to be this perfect, mythical mother is unrealistic and sets women up to feel shame and guilt (Sacks, 2017). The reality is there is a dual nature to the mother archetype—"the loving and the terrible" (Jung, 1970, p. 16). This perfect, glorified image of mother is only one side of the mother archetype. Carl Jung writes about the dark side of the mother archetype in his classic book, *Four Archetypes: Mother Rebirth Spirit Trickster* (1970): "On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (p. 16). When women try to live up to an unattainable, supermom image, they will likely end up feeling exhausted and angry. Some women may recognize that they have been fed a mythical image of mother and ask themselves how they are different from this falsely perpetuated image. They may ask themselves, is my image of myself as a mother realistic for me? This means searching for her personal truth, speaking to other mothers she trusts and respects, and learning to own the myriad of emotions she feels and not just the ones the culture says are acceptable. Authors Krause Eheart and Martel (1983) discuss the importance of finding a personal definition motherhood:

One of the most important tasks facing fourth trimester women is to come to a personal definition of motherhood. Doing this means sorting out and shifting through those emotions about motherhood that often run counter to how a woman thinks she will or should feel. Far too many women make the mistake of relating to a mythical or fantasy personality into which they imagine they will somehow grow as they become mothers. Many such women believe that a mothering instinct will save them when they encounter circumstances that they don't know how to deal with. Other women look toward being a 'supermom'—a fantasy character resembling no real mother. (p. 43)

Each mother must try to come to a realistic image of mother that holds a balance of both the mythical and the dark mother if she is to be balanced and whole. As a collective, we need to stop perpetuating an unrealistic ideal for mothers. We need to see that there is no one right way to be a mother.

Adaptation & Integration

At some point in the early weeks to later months of the postpartum period, most women find they gradually feel more and more like a mother. They have fully accepted the mother archetype into their psyche. While they may still be mourning their previous identity and loss of freedom, they slowly begin to adapt to, and integrate their new identity as a mother. Many women find that navigating their new identity also means reorganizing their relationship with their partner and reassessing how their career fits into their new life.

Reorganizing the Couple Relationship

When a baby enters a couple's world there is need to reorganize and adjust to life as a family unit. Most women I spoke to about their experiences of motherhood stated their relationship with their partner underwent some kind of change. New mothers find their body has changed, their emotions have changed, they are sleep-deprived, and they feel overwhelmed with the responsibility for the needs of their child. This can certainly affect how one interacts with their partner. Additionally, the deep love a mother feels for her child, along with the cascade of oxytocin, dopamine, and prolactin rushing through the nursing mother's brain can "replace or interfere with a new mother's desire for her partner" (Brizendine, 2006, p. 106). The feelings and neurochemistry that she used to experience from physical and sexual interaction with her partner are now being evoked repeatedly throughout the day by caring for her new baby. This means there is quite often a lessened desire for sex and close physical contact with them.

Many women comment that they also see their partner in a different light. Just as a woman is easing into her new identity as a mother, she may also find she is more interested in her partner as a parent than as her companion (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998). Then there are the battles about how to divide the surmounting responsibilities in their new roles as parents. Many couples are forced to take a good look at their values and assumptions about who will do what when it comes to child-rearing (Krause Eheart & Martel, 1983). This is how Rosita, a mother in my community, described the changes in her marriage:

I don't think I've ever felt closer to my husband than I did in those first few moments after my daughter was born. The regular struggles new parents have—learning breastfeeding, life not revolving around yourselves, sleep deprivation, money worries—were all things my husband and I experienced. It challenged our relationship and definitely exposed some flaws and weaknesses in our communication. Some days I feel like we are doing great and other times not as well. I can see that some things get easier and others harder as our children get older. It definitely takes effort to keep our relationship a priority.

Reassessing Career

While adapting to their new identity, many mothers also find a need to reassess their careers. Many women feel torn between their role as a mother and their career. Stern and Bruschiweiler-Stern (1998) say that "perhaps the hardest place of all to find harmony is the bridge between the two roles of mother and career" (p. 202). There can be an internal struggle to find the balance between the joys and responsibilities of being a mother and a woman's personal desire for a career that fulfills her financially and emotionally. Brizendine (2006) writes about this:

Most mothers, on some level, feel torn between the pleasures, responsibilities, and pressures of children and their own need for financial or emotional resources. We know that the female brain responds to this conflict with increased stress, increased anxiety, and reduced brainpower for the mother's work and her children. This situation puts both kids and mothers in deep crisis every day. (p. 202)

Women in these situations often feel like their life isn't working anymore. This can cause many mothers to rethink their careers. When returning to work after

maternity leave, many women decide to reduce their workload, change to a less demanding position, move to part-time work, or even cease to continue working altogether. These are difficult decisions. Mothers who may not wish to return to work but feel the financial pressure to do so may experience loss, anxiety, and depression. On the other hand, women who are financially able to stay at home and raise their children full-time may end up feeling “as if they have dropped out of society and are wasting their education or their career opportunities” (Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998). In her book, *Spilt Milk Yoga: A Guided Self-Inquiry to Finding Your Own Wisdom, Joy, and Purpose Through Motherhood* (2016), Cathryn Monro writes about her personal struggles with being a stay-at-home mother:

As a mother, I work harder than ever, learn more than ever, doing work I know is the most valuable I could ever hope to do. Yet why do I feel so unsatisfied in myself?...why do I feel so unrecognized? Perhaps because nobody recognizes it! I didn't become a mother for the recognition, but I'm working really hard here and I feel undervalued. (p. 75)

We live in a culture that highly under-values the hard work that mothers put in every day. Mothering is the hardest, most exhausting, unrecognized, unpaid job that a woman could ever have. Our achievement culture does not recognize the many daily achievements of motherhood. It is yet another internal battle mothers must face.

Conclusion

The inner journey and process of becoming a mother is a deep psychological transformation that happens over time. Carrying a child within your body, giving birth, and learning to adapt to all the responsibilities of life with a child can be the greatest gift and biggest challenge of a woman's life.

The world of woman-as-mother gets turned upside down in unpredictable ways. I feel it is essential that we give mothers an opportunity to speak honestly and openly about the full experience of their journey. We need to encourage women to share their struggles and talk about the dark parts of motherhood just as much as we do the bright side. We need to listen openly, without judgment and without automatic labelling.

Despite the challenges, the sleeplessness, the loss of self, and the impact on career, friendships, and intimate relationships, every woman I spoke to expressed a similar overall message of gratitude, joy, and pure love for the children that had changed their lives in every way. A fellow mother in my community summed this up perfectly:

I feel that most people see motherhood as all butterflies and rainbows until they have been fully immersed in it. There is a huge reality check the minute you bring that child into the world. I did expect it to be hard, but not this hard. Though I would not trade it for the world. I have no regrets and wish I could do it all over again and have more. Being a mother is the best thing I have ever had the blessing to be able to be. (Alina)

References

- Bergum, V. (1989). *Woman to mother: A transformation*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Brenner, A. (2014, April 29). Becoming a mother: Extraordinary ordinary moments. *In Flux*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-flux/201404/becoming-mother>
- Brizendine, L. (2006). *The female brain*. Three Rivers Press.
- Cozolino, L. (2006). *The neuroscience of human relationships: Attachment and the developing social brain*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Edleman, H. (1994). *Motherless daughters: The legacy of loss*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Jennings Walstedt, J. (1976). Beyond Freud: Towards a new psychotherapy for women. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 1-9.
- Jung, C. (1970). *Four archetypes: Mother rebirth spirit trickster*. Princeton University Press.
- Kohler, R.M. (2013). Archetypes and complexes in the womb. The Jung page, reflections on psychology, culture and life. Houston, TX: The Jung Center. <http://www.cgjungpage.org/learn/articles/analytical-psychology/870-archetypes-and-complexes-in-the-womb>
- Krause Eheart, B., & Martel S. (1983). *The fourth trimester: On becoming a mother*. Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- McBride, A.B. (1973). *The growth and development of mothers*. Harper & Row.
- Monro, C. (2016). *Spilt milk yoga: A guided self-inquiry to finding your own wisdom, joy, and purpose through motherhood*. Familius.
- Neumann, E. (1955). *The great mother: An analysis of the archetype*. Princeton University Press.
- Northrup, C. (2005). *Mother-daughter wisdom: Creating a legacy of physical and emotional health*. Bantam Books.
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2014). *Pregnancy and women's mental health in Canada*. Public Health Agency of Canada.
- Sacks, A. (2017, May 8). *The birth of a mother*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/well/family/the-birth-of-a-mother.html>
- Stern, D.N. & Bruschweiler-Stern, N. (1998). *The birth of a mother: How the motherhood experience changes you forever*. Basic Books.
- Tsabay, S. (2010). *The conscious parent: Transforming ourselves, empowering our children*. Namaste.
- Verny, T. (1981). *The secret life of the unborn child*. Summit Books.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. Routledge.
- Wolf, N. (2001). *Misconceptions: Truth, lies and the unexpected on the journey to motherhood*. Doubleday.
- Woodman, M. (1985). *The pregnant virgin: Psychological transformation*. Inner City Books.