



THE CIRCLE OF LIFE.....AND STRESS

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Since I was a young child, I worked hard in school and planned to pursue a professional career. At the same time, I enjoyed participating in many school and extracurricular activities, juggling a variety of things at the same time. I believed that if I worked hard and did well, I could do anything. That belief continued through law school and even after I became an attorney.

I worked as an attorney for a few years before becoming pregnant. As soon as my pregnancy was confirmed, I began to panic about telling my law firm that I would need to take a little time off to have my child. I would need to ask for a favor that would reveal a major distinction between me and the male members of our firm.

Through months of morning sickness, weight gain, and increasingly frequent unidentified appointments (to my OB/GYN); I did not breathe a word to anyone in my office. Finally, when my weight gain made it completely obvious, I confessed that I was pregnant. In the same breath, I reminded the partners how tough I was, assuring them that I would return no more than a week after I gave birth.

Once my son was born, my "tough" attitude completely changed. Motherhood took over. I could not imagine leaving my precious newborn in the hands of some unknown person so that I could return to work. However, as my leave-of-absence approached six months, I made arrangements for a "nanny." Every fear I could imagine began to enter my mind. How would he be treated? As he started his life of "firsts", what would I miss?

My first day back at the office, I closed my door, sat at my desk and cried. Everyone was very kind and understanding. They took me to lunch and eased me back into the workload. By the

end of the day, I felt much better about my decision to return . . . but the guilt of abandoning my child was ever present.

Little did I know that, not only my attitude about motherhood, but my entire life had changed. As my son grew, so did my responsibilities. Filling out pre-school and school applications, interviews, medical forms, transportation, child care after school, summer programs, after school sports, practice and games, music lessons, homework . . . the list was endless.

My multi-tasking skills were being constantly challenged. I could no longer rely on my organizational and planning skills to keep my head above water. Everything seemed out of control.

One of my most vivid memories of this loss of control was one morning while getting ready for work. Deep in thought about my busy day ahead, my young son came up to me and, with the biggest, most pathetic eyes, said, "Mommy, I don't feel well. I don't think I should go to school today."

Most kids use that line all the time to get out of school. But my son loved school, and was too young to be so worried about a test that he would feign illness. Maybe he really was sick. Every drop of color drained from my face. I began to panic. What could I do? I had to drop my son off at school and then race downtown for an early court appearance.

Long before I became a mediator, I negotiated a deal. "Tell you what. You'll feel better once you get to school. Besides, if you don't, the nurse will call me and I'll come pick you up! In a totally trusting voice, my son looked up and said, "Okay, mommy."

Feeling like a total rat, I loaded my son in my car and took off. Before we proceeded very far (you probably see where this is going), he got sick.....all over my car. I quickly pulled to the side of the road, looked at his sad little face and asked, "Do you feel better now?"

I adjusted to the work/family conflict because I had no choice. I needed to work-- both for the income and for my own self respect. I coped by adjusting my stress level upwards, sacrificing all of my free time, and plowing forward with my never ending list of responsibilities.

As time went on, I added two more sons. My life became a jumble of racing from one place to the next: school carpools, race to work, home to cook dinner, supervise homework, help with school projects, schedule doctor, dentist, orthodontist and other appointments and lessons, leave work early for after-school activities, an occasional field trip....along with feeling guilty about not being able to "do it all." Every evening when the days' work was done and the boys were finally tucked into bed, I would collapse in my bedroom chair . . . to begin tackling office work and planning the next day.

Plan as I might, the unpredictability of having a family would constantly emerge. One such occasion was when I walked out of my bedroom on a Monday morning to find a handwritten note that had apparently been left the night before:

Mom -- I need for 5 people

Flowers
candy
camamil ("chamomile") tea
earplugs
whiteboard markers
whiteboard erasers
stress ball
3 tiaras
2 crowns

by Tuesday! Please try to get all this stuff. Thanks.

With this short little note, all of my plans for Monday were changed.

Now that my youngest has started middle school, the unpredictability and extent of my responsibilities have somewhat eased. My boys are becoming more and more independent, about which I am feeling relieved but ambivalent.

Yet, with the cycle of life, my parents are aging, with increasing ailments and almost daily doctor appointments. They now need more of my time. My mother recently told me, "growing old is not for the faint of heart." As always, my mother is right.

Cynthia is the current President of the Beverly Hills Bar Association whose personal life experiences were the impetus for this Symposium. She is a mediator, arbitrator and negotiator, both in and out of her Century City law office, where she is a shareholder of Pasternak, Pasternak & Patton. Her husband, David (the second Pasternak), is the former President of the Los Angeles Bar Association. She and David have three sons, Greg, Kevin and Matthew. She has no spare time.