



BACK TO WORK...?

Should I go back to work or not? This is a question parents who take time off during their child's early years often ask themselves. For many parents, especially mothers, returning to work brings another problem: that of guilt. By returning to work they worry that they are turning their back on their families. This is the 'guilt gremlin' and it can be a horrible, insidious thing.

This 'guilt gremlin' is the master of the lose/lose situation, where you are damned if you do, damned if you don't and damned for just thinking about it. The guilt is there if you go to work and thus feel you are not dealing with your family responsibilities. It can be there if you stay at home and not pursue your career or contribute to the family budget. This feeling of guilt can lock you into a cycle of indecision and create more guilt, as you just don't know what to do.

This 'guilt gremlins' can be defeated and you can turn this lose/lose situation into a win/win one. In order to return to work you need to know two things: WHY you are returning to work, and HOW you plan to return. By answering these two questions, you can arm yourself against your 'gremlins' with knowledge and understanding.

It is important to tackle these two questions in the right order: first the 'WHY?', followed by the 'HOW?'. Many people focus too much on the 'How?' and forget the 'Why?', getting bogged down in the practicalities of how to return to work without fully understanding their motivations for doing so. It is at this point that doubt and guilt can raise their ugly heads. 'Why?' is the reason you take action, it is your motivation.

Even if you feel that you have no choice about returning to work because you need the money to support your children, it is still worth looking at the 'Why?'. What can you do with the money? How will the extra income improve your children's lives? Write down all the reasons you can think of why you should return to work. Include everything, no matter how trivial it may seem. Look for common themes that tie your reasons together. These themes will become your goals. If after doing this exercise you still don't feel motivated, ask yourself: "Do I want or need to return to work?" and write down all the reasons for not returning. If the reasons for not returning outweigh the reasons for returning, then the answer is there: you now have the motivation to stay at home and look after the family.

Now you have the motivation, it is time to work on the 'How?' How can you return to work? What type of work do you want to do? Who can support you and who can help support your family? What are your and your family's time commitments? What obstacles might

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stop you returning and how can they be overcome? Ask yourself these questions and many more until you start to build up an action plan for your return to work. Write down anything that might affect your actions and then prioritise it.

Next, give yourself a date to start work. It is important to remember to be reasonable with your time and not to be over-ambitious. Now plan out a timetable, working backwards from your proposed start date. Break it down into achievable steps and goals, so you can measure your progress. You now have method as well as motivation.

When planning for a return to work, keep in mind your work/life balance. The most important word here is 'balance'. Work and family life are not competing with each other; they should complement each other. Before you consider a job, think about how your family life and work life can exist harmoniously together. Ask yourself: 'What can I do to achieve this?' If you aim for a win/win situation, you might just achieve it.

With this motivation, knowledge and planning you have equipped yourself to defeat the 'guilt gremlin'. The gremlin only has power by raising questions of doubt and making you doubt yourself. By working through those two vital questions, you have built yourself an armoury of answers based on reason. The light of reason can disperse the 'guilt gremlins' when they arise.