WHAT IT'S LIKE TO... Return to practice after maternity leave

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After graduating in 2002 from Charles Sturt University in Albury NSW, Sarena began her career in Geelong with a brief occupational rehabilitation role for youth with brain injuries then spent several years in acute and rehabilitative rotational positions across Victorian hospitals. Shortly after she travelled to the UK and worked in many positions across London and regional areas including general acute, geriatric, cardiac rehabilitation, complex neurological rehabilitation, acquired brain injury, rapid response, intermediate care and community health / social services. In between, upon short visits home to Australia, she worked in transition care and community rehabilitation positions for Bluecare and QLD health before finally settling on the Sunshine Coast. There she has worked across in-patient rehab, out-patient rehab and leadership roles for eight and a half years. Recently returning from an extended period of maternity leave, after having two beautiful and very busy children, she has found a steep learning curve with many challenges, in founding Allied Health Support Services in early 2016.
How the role or situation came about?

Although such an extended period of leave was never the plan, it was a blessing in disguise. Battling through a difficult second pregnancy with medical complications then experiencing post natal depression; delaying my return to practice was the best choice for all of our family. When I did return, I felt ready for the next challenge and keen to use my brain again although I was very fearful of being able to actually undertake my clinical role!

What is a typical day or week?

I am currently working a 5 day fortnight in outpatient sub-acute rehab and I highly recommend trialling a 2 or 3 day return if you have the option! My arrangement allowed for a spare day to 'myself' once a fortnight without the kids, as I have them cared for 3 days a week. This certainly helps with all the household management, study and jobs that need to be done. I am also setting up and running a business and studying at the moment so it is very busy! I try to keep to a routine where one day a week and mornings on the weekend are family fun times and I do “computer work” one to two days a week with evenings as well. That way, there are some boundaries set up. Being able to switch 'off' work and switch 'on' at home is really important.

Joys?

I really enjoy the combination of doing clinical work some days, non-clinical business work other days and crazy kids activities and household activities in between. On work days I get to enjoy a hot cup of coffee and go to the toilet by myself and talk to adults all day. On home days there is a routine as well, but all the rules often go out the window and if the kids want to draw or play chasing games or have a picnic outside - that’s what we do! For me I feel a sense of pride and productivity. I am able to enjoy meaningful occupations whilst fulfilling my roles of both 'motherhood' and 'therapist'.

Challenges?

It is a very busy lifestyle for our family at the moment!! I personally find the biggest challenge is actually looking after myself and ensuring I schedule exercise, relaxation and leisure activities in and around everything. Some weeks I feel I don’t have enough time at home and some weeks I feel like I don’t have enough time at work to get everything done!! Everyone I talk to feels the same - you always feel a little split, under prepared and completely not confident in your own abilities… Communication is always difficult at both home and work so being aware of that and utilising all the strategies that are effective for you is paramount! It certainly took several months before I felt there was an organised physical routine at both home
and work, and my clinical confidence started to return. I think if you're mentally prepared for that and you have supports around you, that helps.

**Recommendations and considerations**

* Communication strategies; at work use emails, whiteboards, communication books, meeting minutes, handovers, seek clarification when needed. At home use shared lists and calendars (either in paper form or on smart phones!), ensure you are not the only care giver who understands what your child eats/needs/likes etc, discuss realities and fears (rational or irrational) and potential solutions or strategies prior to returning.

* Organisational strategies; primarily at home eg daycare drop off's, meal planning for the week, calendar and to do lists and at work I use several systems for documentation, filing, diary/calendar use and keeping my work responsibilities under control. Saying no or 'not at the moment' is important too and I struggled with this initially as I was just so keen to get back to working within a professional team!

* Consider using a mentor

* Seek supervision as appropriate

* Stay in communication with your employer and your colleagues if possible, even just via email.

* Prepare yourself mentally, emotionally and physically. Returning to work is extremely tiring in every way, especially given you're already probably running on very low sleep levels! You will return to using your brain in a way that you haven't done for a while. Mentally dividing your attention constantly is exhausting but when you get home there is no down time anymore!

* Organise a transitional period of care for your child/children. If they will be going to Daycare, set up some play dates first, then move to a full day when you are available if need be, before you return to work.

* Prepare yourself clinically as much as you can, eg use online resources, liaise with colleagues, keep your CPD points up to date, review pertinent clinical guidelines and protocols prior to returning to the workplace if possible. Enquire after your eligibility for 'Keeping In Touch' days which entitle you to attend your workplace for a part of, or a whole day, paid. Read more about Parental Leave and entitlements in our Guidance section.

* Be honest with yourself and everyone around you! Don't apologise, but make sure you explain yourself and your needs... If you're not sure or need clarification or support, it's important to say so. If you need time or employer confidence, then say so!
Future of these roles or situations?

I strongly believe the cultural expectations of the mother staying home to care for the children full time, are no longer relevant. Women are increasingly wanting and needing to return to work and also have recurrent extended periods of leave. I believe this is an area we need to look at seriously and review current resources at a national level and consider all the flexible options for the workforce.

I believe there needs to be an increase in support for both employers and employees. Not only upon return to practice, but prior to leaving, during leave and in preparation for return. I would certainly be advocating for an 'Information & Support Pack' from Human Relations Departments in larger organisations and emulating a similar strategy within smaller businesses so ensure everyone is clear on their responsibilities and expectations throughout the process, given it may be over a period of several years.

I believe there needs to be more flexible and relevant options for individuals to access professional development, support and guidance throughout this phase of their professional and personal lives.

Personally, I am trying to enact change with the starting of this business and with my employer, to support and empower other Allied Health professionals. Big changes take lots of little changes though!

Other testimonials or comments?

" It was so daunting and scary, to have different responsibilities outside of the family again! I struggled to remember my clinical skills initially.." Hayley

" Everything takes you so long to complete; assessments, treatment plans, documentation... It certainly takes a while to get yourself back up to speed! You need to be kind to yourself.." Jen

" I enjoyed going back to work but really found it difficult to leave the kids in the care of someone else. You need to be able to switch your brain back and forth between work and home..." Amy
"It just takes a while to get the routine worked out!"  Bec

Further Reading

