

REGAIN YOUR CONFIDENCE

after maternity leave

Worried about returning to work? Follow our simple steps to feel better!



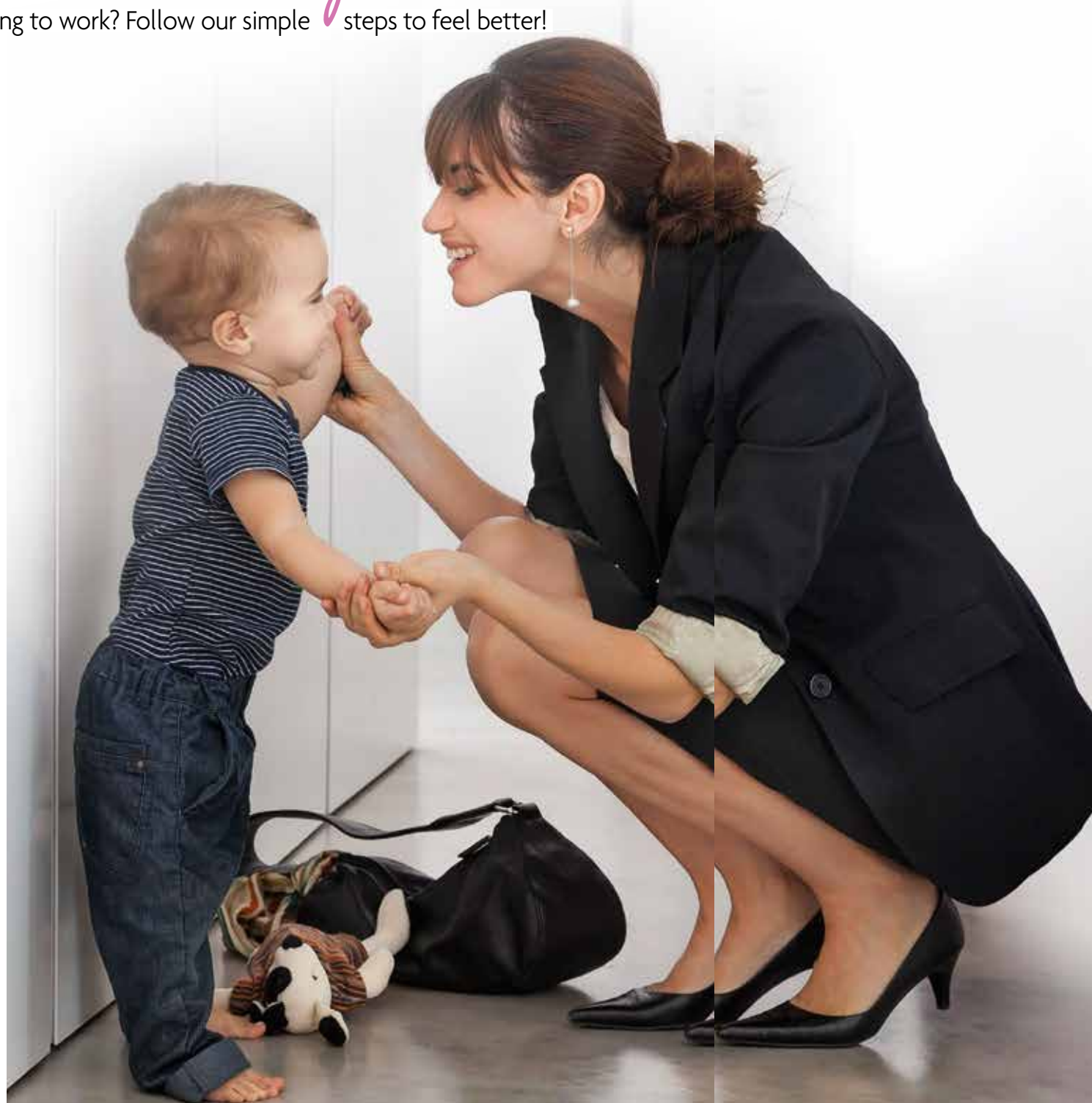
Jessica Chivers is a mum of two, career coach and author of *Mothers Work!* (£10.99, Hay House).

For many mums, the last few weeks of their maternity leave can be a daunting time. If you're going back to work you are probably focused on the logistics – starting your baby in nursery, having a busier morning routine, perhaps a longer commute. But there's an additional consideration too. What if you're feeling less confident about doing your job?

The reality is, you're still you, only more capable than ever, and now you're a whizz at multi-tasking too. This is all about confidence.

According to a 2013 study by The Association of Accounting Technicians, eight out of 10 mothers lack confidence when returning to work. Some of this is due to biology. Research suggests that the area of the brain related to worry is larger in women than in men, meaning we spend relatively more time feeling anxious, and worrying about what people think. And in the workplace, women tend to be less confident than men. We tend to only apply for roles when we have 100% of the requirements, whereas men apply with just 60%. So with biology and socialisation at play, women are already on an unequal footing.

When you add leaving the workplace for maternity leave to the mix, your confidence can fall even



further. 'You've been out of doing what you do, so it's natural to think "Can I still do this?"' says career coach Jessica Chivers. 'You've been away, and the rest of the team has been there working. Feeling vulnerable in that situation is very normal, and very human.'

Women have a tendency to dismiss maternity leave as time-off, when it's anything but. In fact it's a positive enhancement to your skillset. 'We need to think about changing our thinking from "I'm on the backfoot, I'm rusty," to "I'm fresh, I'm an asset, and I'm coming back with ideas and perspectives that everyone else doesn't have, because they've been here for the last 12 months",' explains Jessica. There are lots of things to do to prepare yourself emotionally before you return to work...

SEE YOURSELF AS A CONFIDENT PERSON

Choose five words that describe who you want to be at work – how you want your boss and colleagues to see you. Then close your eyes and visualise yourself doing the things that person would do. Picture how you speak, walk and move. See yourself in a meeting and imagine your boss congratulating you on your work, then keep running through the scene. Just as athletes improve performance by imagining themselves on the winner's podium, you can use visualization to boost your confidence at work.

'Research shows mental rehearsal is almost as effective as physical rehearsal in terms of improved performance,' explains Jessica. 'Think about who you want to meet in your first week back and what you want to say and ask. For instance, if you want to be seen as knowledgeable, ask someone what they think about something that's hot news in your industry right now. Make sure you share your opinion and how you've come to your view.'

LIST YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS

Write down everything you did well before you went on maternity leave.

'HOW I PREPARED TO RETURN TO WORK'



'I phoned my boss to make sure there was a desk ready for me and that I was sitting with my team.'

JACKIE SEELY, FROM SOUTHAMPTON, MUM TO JOEY, ONE.



'I increased the frequency of Keep In Touch days nearer to my return, so that I was familiar with current events and had seen colleagues.'

MICHELLE DAVIES, FROM WICKFORD, MUM TO AARON, SIX, AND ZACK, TWO.



'There had been lots of changes in my industry, so I did all the regulatory training that had taken place during my year off.'

LIZ SLADE, FROM BRENTWOOD, MUM TO AMELIA-ROSE, TWO

List your achievements and your strengths, making it as detailed as possible. Now read it back. How does that person look on paper? Like a high-performing employee – someone the employer is looking forward to having back! You may forget your PC password on day one, but the skills that enabled you to achieve all of your successes go deeper than that, and they haven't gone anywhere.

You're still you, only more capable – and a whizz at multi-tasking

'When you return to work, make a note of three things that went well every day, why they happened and how these things could have a positive knock-on effect,' says Jessica. 'Writing them down, rather than just thinking about them, means you will linger for longer on the experiences, and embed them in your memory.'

BEING YOU *Confidence*

CHALLENGE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

There's a little voice that many of us hear from time to time – the one that says, 'You're not good enough' or 'You've forgotten everything'. The trick to dealing with this negative self-talk is to name it and challenge it.

Ask yourself if your thoughts are based on facts or just your own interpretation? What's the worst that could happen? And will it matter in six months or a year? The quickest fix is to immediately follow a negative thought with 'Well, is that really true?' The answer in most cases is a resounding 'No'.

'Instead of focusing on potential problems and catastrophic fantasies, ask yourself "What's the best that could happen when I go back to work?"' says Jessica.

'When we think about the most extreme positive possibilities, we sit up straighter, walk taller and feel more resourceful. The gremlin voices sound less credible when you're in that state.'

REMEMBER YOURSELF AT YOUR BEST

A key confidence-boosting trick is to think about a time when you were excelling at work. 'Bring to mind a time when you were performing really well,' says Jessica. 'Think "I was capable of that, I can do it again."

'The next step is to ask yourself what strengths were you using there? What conditions were in place and how can you recreate them? Then ask yourself, how do I recreate the conditions that enable me to have complete focus?'

'You need to be really clear with your line manager about what she wants from you in the first six weeks you're back, then knuckle down and get some quick wins,' says Jessica. By remembering that you performed well when focused, and creating the conditions to become focused, you increase your confidence, and ability to perform well again.

Be organized

Plan your first week in minute detail, booking meetings and organizing lunch dates. It will give you focus and purpose, and keep niggling confidence doubts at bay.



DON'T WRITE OFF MATERNITY LEAVE

Remember, you're even *more* capable now you're a mum. Focus on the important and useful skills that you've honed while you've been away from work caring for and bringing up your baby, such as patience, teamwork and delegation. 'Think about those skills you have learned to do well and how you can bring them to bear in the work environment,'

suggests Jessica. 'When we are on maternity leave, we learn so much about empathy and really understanding someone else's needs. Teamwork is a really powerful skill too, because we realise that we can't do everything ourselves.'

5 THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU GO BACK TO WORK

1. Use your Keep In Touch days – the simple act of going into the office will help you feel more confident.
2. Meet your boss for coffee to find out what's going on.
3. Meet with your colleagues too to find out what's *really* going on!
4. Arrange for Daddy, a family member or trusted friend to be the primary nursery contact during your first week back, so you'll feel able to focus on work.
5. Buy something new to wear on day one that makes you feel fabulous!