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Trick That's So
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Don't Believe It

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Plus
Low-Sugar Drinks



5 New-Mom Challenges

Yes, your new baby rocks—but your life might be a little rocky.
We'll show you how to deal.

Before my first child, Jack, was born, I had a romantic vision of life with baby. We'd spend all day cuddling on the couch, he'd look up at me and coo peacefully, and he'd sleep easily and often. When my husband, Devon, got home from work, we'd all sit around and cuddle some more.

Here's what life was really like: For three months straight, my baby cried, and cried, and cried. Devon would often come home to find me also crying—hysterically. I rarely showered, I felt totally sleep-deprived, and I found myself counting the days until I could return to my job—where I could at least eat a sandwich in peace.

Flash-forward a few years: I ditched the career (for now at least) and am at home full-time. Jack's 4, I've added a daughter, Kate, who's 2, and I'm pregnant again! Woo hoo! But even though I'm an old hand at the baby thing, that doesn't mean I'm not still freaked out by some of the challenges we're all pretty much guaranteed to face. Jean Kunhardt and Lisa Spiegel, directors of Soho Parenting, in New York City, and two of the coauthors of *A Mother's Circle: An Intimate Dialogue on Becoming a Mother*, talked to me about the biggies—and spilled their best strategies for coping with each one.

ALEXANDRA GRABLEWSKI, STYLING BY KRISTEN PETUSI; GROOMING BY THORA FOR STILA COSMETICS AT ART HOUSE MANAGEMENT; ONE PIECE; ZUTANO; BURIP CLOTH; BASK HOME

You will feel
new-mom
joy—just not
every minute
of the day.



1 The Challenge YOU STRUGGLE WITH BREASTFEEDING

"The myth is that nursing comes naturally," says Spiegel. "But for most women that's just not true. It may finally feel natural after many weeks, but it takes work and practice to get it right." For sure, moms often feel intense pressure from their doctors, friends, and family to nurse their baby. And while the entire medical community recommends breastfeeding for the benefits it offers both mother and child, Spiegel and Kunhardt strongly encourage moms to keep the breast-versus-bottle debate in perspective. "The most important thing is that feedings are comfortable for you and your baby," says Spiegel. In other words: If you're always tense and frustrated while you're nursing, it's not doing anyone any good.

How to cope: If breastfeeding isn't going well, get help from a lactation consultant or another mom who has nursed her kids. "Ask her to come over for a couple of hours to just watch and see what you're doing," says Spiegel. "She may have some suggestions that'll make things better—or it may help just to know that you're doing everything right and that it will get easier with time." Give yourself the goal of sticking with it for at least a month, since it can take this long to get the timing and positioning down. After that, if you're still frustrated, consider switching to formula.

2 The Challenge YOU HATE YOUR HUSBAND

Okay, hate may be too strong a word. But many new moms—who assumed having a baby would bring them closer to their sweetheart—are shocked to find themselves at their husband's throat. "You'll probably think about divorcing your husband at least a dozen times during that first year—and that's totally normal!" says Kunhardt. "After all, adjusting to your new role as parents adds an unbelievable amount of stress to even the strongest relationship." New mothers may feel that their husband doesn't understand just how challenging it is to care for a baby 24/7. They may resent having to take on most of the household and baby-care chores that they thought would be more evenly split. Men, meanwhile, feel more pressure than ever to succeed at their job

and provide financially for their family. So it's no wonder that the mood in your house is often anything but warm, fuzzy, or romantic.

How to cope: "First of all, realize that your spouse is probably doing the very best he can," says Kunhardt. "Second, acknowledge that taking care of a child is really hard and it's going to temporarily stress your relationship." From there, the most important thing to do is talk about what's bothering you. "Let your husband know what you need from him—after all, he can't read your mind," says Spiegel. If, for example, you really feel that you're doing all the cleaning and cooking, don't fume about it: Sit down with him and make a list of what each of you could do. Sometimes, just having your husband take over a night feeding so you get extra sleep, or asking him to do the laundry once a week, can make all the difference.

3 **The Challenge** **YOU FEEL FAT**

Turn on the TV or walk by any newsstand and you'll be bombarded by images of celebrity moms—Halle, Christina, Julia—each skinnier than the next. The result? New moms assume that squeezing into their pre-baby, size 6 jeans will be a piece of (rice) cake. Unfortunately, if you don't happen to have a full-time nanny and a personal trainer, it can take a while for your body to seem like your own again. "Mothers who lose the weight right away are in the minority," says Spiegel. "Most women take at least a year to get back to their pre-pregnancy size."

Even those who shed the pounds quickly may be shocked to discover that their body has morphed in other ways. "Childbirth comes with war wounds," says Kunhardt. "Suddenly, you've got varicose veins, your hips are wider, and your hair is falling out—you may even be suffering from the baby blues."

How to cope: Remind yourself that the extra padding serves an important purpose: It helps store the energy and fat you need to successfully breastfeed. And while it's good to squeeze some exercise into your schedule when you can, try not to hyper-focus on losing weight. "Walking with your baby in the stroller is a great way to fit in exercise and relieve stress," says Spiegel. Finally, give your husband a little credit. "He probably won't even notice—or care—about those extra pounds or stretch marks," says Spiegel. "He just wants you two to reconnect as a couple."

4 **The Challenge** **YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT YOUR JOB**

For many women, the decision to return to work after having a baby is a no-brainer: Your family may need your paycheck to survive (or at least pay for all those diapers). But for mothers who have a choice—go back to the job or become a stay-at-home mom—the decision can be an agonizing one, and most will continue to wonder whether they've made the right choice. "Being alone all day with a baby can be isolating," says Spiegel. "Many stay-at-home moms discover that they miss their community of coworkers and the structure their job provided." At the same time, working moms often feel overloaded with guilt that they aren't with their children at all times.

How to cope: Reach out to other moms who are struggling with the same issues you are. In addition, give your choice a one-year time limit. "Women think that once they decide, they have to stick to that choice for the rest of their lives, which is simply not true," says Kunhardt. "Frame it as, 'What am I going to do this year?' And remember, you can always decide that things aren't working and make a change." Finally, consider asking your employer for a flexible work schedule or looking into part-time opportunities that'll give you the best of both worlds.

5 **The Challenge** **YOU THINK YOU HAVE TO BE PERFECT**

Mothers feel a lot of pressure: They shouldn't live in sweats, their kids should always be happy, and their house should be spotless. But trying to be perfect will make you crazy, says Kunhardt. Instead, aim to be a "good-enough mother." This means providing a safe and loving environment for your baby but accepting that you'll make mistakes—and you and your house will be messy. Rejecting the perfect-mother myth also means resisting the urge to micromanage your baby's day. "Moms think they should constantly be talking or singing to their baby or jumping up every time he cries," says Spiegel. "But babies need downtime. They really are happy staring at the ceiling fan."

How to cope: Don't feel guilty about popping your baby into his bouncy seat for short periods during the day so you can eat lunch, take a shower, or put your feet up. In addition, accept that babies cry—and don't take it as a sign of your failure as a parent if you can't immediately soothe your little one.

Finally, ignore criticism from family, friends, and strangers about your mom skills. "Some people will comment on everything from how you're spoiling your baby by always picking him up to how he's not dressed warmly enough," says Kunhardt. "Just thank the person for the tips and keep doing what you feel is right." ☆

A Joy of Motherhood

Of course, having a new baby also brings many reasons to cheer—and one of the biggest is the impact it has on your relationship with your own mom. "Many women have a renewed respect for their mother after they have kids," says Kunhardt. "They realize how tough a job parenting can be and appreciate all of the sacrifices their parents made for them." Raising and caring for a baby can also bring you and your mother closer and help you form a stronger bond. "Use this time to find out about your mom's experience as a parent and talk about what you remember from your own childhood," says Spiegel. "Chances are, you'll discover many things that you admire about your mom and want to emulate—or you may find things you want to do differently."