

Lies Moms Tell Each Other (And Ourselves)

It starts early.

"It's all so new and exciting."

"Recovery was easy."

"I'm almost back in my pre-pregnancy jeans."

"I love *every minute* of being a mom."

And continues for years, "His safety school is a bargain -- we're so relieved!"

Why do we lie to each other? And where do the expectations that perpetuate these lies come from? After all, we're our mothers' daughters. We have *choices*. We go to work, stay home, marry or don't because we want to, not because someone said we should. Right?

Sort of.

Mothers today do have more choices, but they also face expectations that would make June Cleaver give up and drink. Somehow, rather than reject June's imaginary image of house cleaning in pearls, we've raised the bar on motherhood. And those expectations are perpetuated by everything from playground encounters to mass media and advertising. In fact, the modern image of the do-it-all mom is so prevalent, it's hard to know who's to blame.

Between demanding careers, managing the household and trying to set the table, set an example and still find time for romance and "balance," (whatever that is), most moms I know feel overwhelmed, overworked and guilty about the frozen foods that frequent their children's plate. We struggle to admit these feelings to each other, much less admit defeat to ourselves, and leave the unfolded laundry where it is (as every motherhood book I ever read admonished me to do).

For years, I desperately tried to live up to these lofty expectations, I wore a scared smile that screamed "I'm happy!" and people assumed I was. In reality, I was wearing a mask that hid layers of self-doubt raging inside me. I wasn't good enough, patient enough, smart enough, happy enough. I was never enough. And along the way, while working so hard to impress other people, I lost myself... and eventually, stopped liking myself.

Most importantly, I felt alone. Where was the mom memo explaining how to make this all look -- and actually be -- easy?

In 2010, when the voices in my own head screamed loud enough to force real change, I started exploring these questions further. Where do other mothers pull their confidence from? How do they keep it all together? When do they find the time to dust the tops of the books they used to have time to read?

And to my great surprise, and relief, after studying moms in 17 countries around the world, I learned I wasn't the only mom pretending. The masks moms were wearing -- to do it all and make it look effortless -- crossed professions, socio-economics and the battle lines drawn in the mommy wars. The emotion that kept popping up, over and over again, was self-doubt. They also didn't feel good enough!

This code of silence among moms is built on the backs of the generations of mothers who have come before us and raised healthy and productive children. And it's largely because of their success that we assumed it would be easy. The reality, however, is that from Marissa Mayer, with her office cum nursery, to the most capable stay-at-home moms, we are all making choices about how we want to raise our children, and very few come without compromise.

Here's what it all comes down to: When we propagate false truths about what it's like to be a mother, we make an already difficult job that much harder. Rather than trying to live up to expectations and doubting ourselves along the way, we should be reveling in the humanity of motherhood and sharing that joy (and the heartache) that is part and parcel of the experience. It's messy. That's what keeps it interesting.

By accepting ourselves and the imperfect science of being a good mother, we can end the real mommy wars, the wars raging inside us, and be who we really are. While every day brings a new temptation to put the mask back on, I'm doing the best I can to keep it off. Forever.