

## Chapter 3

### The Emotions of Exclusively Pumping

**M**ommy guilt. Every new mother feels it. It creeps in uninvited sometime during the first few weeks of your baby's life. It is unavoidable and, in many ways, it is a sign that you are a good mother. Perhaps guilt is a signal that you love your child. You want to do everything you possibly can for your child; you want to give her the best. Who can fault you for that? Yet when you've gone through a stressful or challenging experience and have not been able to meet your expectations for motherhood and caring for your child, guilt can sometimes hit you early and hard. If you are exclusively pumping by choice, then this is likely not something you'll experience, but for those who are exclusively pumping because of challenges breastfeeding or an experience that was outside of your control (premature delivery, cleft palate, health issues) it is likely that you will at some point struggle with feelings of guilt. When the worry—the belief that you are somehow harming your child or not providing them with what they need—begins to overwhelm you or becomes all consuming or ever-present, mommy guilt has reached a new level. A mother who experiences difficulties with

breastfeeding often becomes consumed with a sense of guilt: a belief that she has let her baby down, that she has not given everything she could to her baby. 'Guilt' is the name women will commonly give to the emotion they are feeling. Discussing the use of the word "guilt" Diane Wiessinger, in her essay "The Language of Breastfeeding", suggests it is an ineffective and inaccurate word, pointing the finger directly at a system that isn't doing what it needs to do:

"We don't want to make bottle-feeding mothers feel angry. We don't want to make them feel betrayed. We don't want to make them feel cheated." Peel back the layered implications of 'we don't want to make them feel guilty,' and you will find a system trying to cover its own tracks. It is not trying to protect her. It is trying to protect itself. Let's level with mothers, support them when breastfeeding doesn't work, and help them move beyond this inaccurate and ineffective word.<sup>1</sup>

So is it really guilt? Do we really feel guilty when we are unable to meet our breastfeeding expectations?

## Guilt vs. Grief

Guilt is something that comes at us externally. It is based on the judgment—or perceived judgment—of those around us. We are afraid of judgment from those around us, or else know that there is reason for us to be judged, and this causes feelings of guilt. Perhaps for some women feelings of guilt are proper and deserved; however, my experience communicating with hundreds of women over the past ten years has been that while women often name these feelings as guilt there is something else going on. In most cases, what women are feeling—in my opinion—is more accurately described as grief rather than guilt.

Guilt is something we feel when we know we could have done more, but didn't; when we went against our better judgment and made a choice we knew wasn't the best for those involved; or when we blatantly make a decision that we know is only in our own best interest and not in the best interest of those who we are to care for and love. Yet almost every exclusively pumping woman I've ever met has pumped because of breastfeeding challenges and a desire to provide her baby with what she believes is the best—breast milk. Where is there room for guilt? While 'guilt' may often be the word used to describe their feelings, 'grief' is perhaps a more accurate term.

The distinction between guilt and grief is not based on the amount of effort you put into breastfeeding or the length of time you persevered. It really has more to do with the information you had at the time, your efforts to access information and support, and your dedication to do everything you could do *at the time*. Once you have exhausted your resources—and for some, those resources are going to be very thin—you have a decision to make. If you are faced with a baby who is hungry, who is not gaining weight, or who is crying incessantly, you need to feed your baby. Without the resources and support to help you breastfeed successfully, what else are you going to choose? You choose to bottle feed, whether it is expressed breast milk or formula in the bottle. When you have exhausted your resources, and done all you can do, there is no reason to feel guilty. As new mothers, we do what we believe is right at the time. There is no guilt in that.

On a very personal level, I understand this sense of guilt all too well. When my son was born so early and so tiny, the guilt set in. My body had failed him. I had developed preeclampsia at thirty weeks and he was showing signs of intrauterine growth restriction. The day before I was induced, doctors tested the umbilical blood flow and determined that it was in the ninety-

seventh percentile. This high percentile was not a good thing and meant the blood flow in the cord was compromised. My son was doing okay, but my body was quickly shutting down and the doctors determined it was best to deliver right away. My determination was then to ensure I could breastfeed. I remember asking several times during a quick tour of the NICU what the chances of breastfeeding were. Would I be able to breastfeed my son? All indications were positive, and so I clung to that hope. My body wouldn't fail my son again.

But five weeks later, even though my son was doing very well with expressed milk and I was determined to make breastfeeding work, it was not working. Feelings of failure were strong; I figured I just didn't know what I was doing. The lactation consultants in the hospital seemed frustrated that my son was not breastfeeding better than he was, and I internalized this frustration, thinking I was the cause. As I left the hospital for the first time with my son, I remember feeling emotionally numb. I was operating largely on auto-pilot and still clinging to the belief—the hope—that breastfeeding was going to work out.

Of course, life rarely goes as planned and things got progressively worse at home. Eventually, it got to the point where he was projectile vomiting several times a day, screaming after most feedings, and thrashing and wailing if I attempted to latch him. It became very personal. Was my son rejecting me? I sought out assistance from lactation consultants and breastfeeding experts. The advice ranged from "It's okay to switch to formula if that is what you want" to "You've got to get that baby to the breast" but with no offer of help or useful suggestions. After finally resigning myself to exclusively pumping, partly to preserve at least a small degree of my sanity and partly as a retreat from defeat, I found one doctor who suggested a diagnosis of reflux and offered a readily available, over-the-counter medicine to see

if perhaps it might help my son. In less than twenty-four hours it was as though a new baby had moved into the house.

Guilt? You bet! But I quickly realized that I had done everything I could do with what I was given. I had lactation support in the hospital. I sought out lactation support when my son was released from the hospital. I talked to my doctor. I demanded a referral to a pediatrician. I read the books. I searched online. I was screaming for help; and yet the system—or perhaps more accurately, society—failed me. What more could I have done? Could I have continued trying to breastfeed exclusively? Possibly. But if you have gone through the cycle of breastfeeding, pumping, and bottle feeding you understand what an incredible toll that takes on you. It is not a long-term solution. Could I have stopped pumping and just breastfed to see how well my son would have done if he was forced to breastfeed with no bottle in sight? I could have, but I felt at the time that all I had going for me was a strong milk supply and I feared I might risk it all if I stopped pumping. I felt alone and lonely in the experience. And in hindsight, I know that I did all I could do, physically and emotionally, to make it work. But still it didn't.

And so we're left with guilt and grief. Once you work through the feelings of guilt, and recognize that you have done all you could do given your knowledge, support, and physical and emotional limitations, you are left with the grief. Breastfeeding is a biologically expected activity. It is, for most women, a relationship that is deeply desired. To lose that relationship is to lose something very real, something that has value and purpose and meaning. Just as we mourn when we lose a person we love, we must also mourn the loss of the relationship we wished for.

Part of the challenge in understanding these feelings as grief, as opposed to guilt, is the way that breastfeeding is framed in our society. Many people surrounding you may have a "get over it" attitude. Many suggest to new moms who are having breast-

feeding difficulties, “Just switch to formula.” But these attitudes and well-intended suggestions serve only to make us feel that our emotions are wrong and that feeling sad over our loss is invalid—but it most definitely is not! Working through these emotions is critical, both to your well-being and your baby’s well-being. Coming to terms with your shared, rocky start will help you grow and move forward.

## Moving Forward

Regardless of what we call it—guilt, grief, or regret—the experience of losing the breastfeeding relationship you had hoped for and expected can, and most likely will, affect you in the future. It may hide in a corner or be an obvious stumbling block in your decision to have other children. It may appear to have been tamed and controlled, only to unleash itself when you get that positive sign on the pregnancy test. The impact of breastfeeding failure can be varied, but for most women who experienced difficulties breastfeeding, the impact is very real.

Grieving takes work. It also takes time. But you can help yourself by identifying your feelings, examining them, and working to accept them and move forward from your experience.

First, it is important to take some time to reflect on what you expected. What expectations did you have for the process of breastfeeding? How were those expectations met or not met? It’s natural to have expectations about things, but having expectations without flexibility can lead to an increased sense of loss. When you only picture one possible outcome, there is nothing but disappointment and loss from any other outcome. When faced with an experience that is not what you expected, it is necessary to come to terms with it. It is the shared, developing relationship between you and your child that is most important. Exclusively pumping may not what you expected, but it is yours.

When breastfeeding doesn't go as expected, there is a true loss for both mother and baby. As mothers, we lose out on what we planned for and hoped for, and both we and our babies lose the natural process and bonding relationship fostered by breastfeeding. It is so important to recognize it as a loss and allow yourself to grieve the loss. It's okay, normal even, to be sad. Often those around us don't recognize the loss or understand why we feel so sad. If you're feeling overwhelmed and have no one to talk to, consider finding a doctor or therapist to whom you can voice your emotions. Do not bottle up your feelings, or push them away, thinking that you're overreacting. It *is* sad when a mother and baby lose the opportunity for a nursing relationship, and working through your emotions will help you put your experience in perspective.

The next important step is to recognize the experience for what it was. Everything we do is a learning experience. We don't always have all the answers; no one should expect us to. But we do have the opportunity to learn from our experience and move forward with intention. Once you're feeling capable of honestly looking at the reasons breastfeeding didn't work out, try to pinpoint what it was that went wrong. Consider the three big elements: lack of information, lack of support, and societal pressures and influence.<sup>2</sup> Where did it go wrong in your case? Be clear here. This is not intended to be a blame game. The idea isn't to find blame in what you did or didn't do. We all do the best we can, with the information we have, at a given time. But to move forward, we need to be able to look critically at our experiences and actions and understand what happened.

The grief you feel is deeply personal and is something that you alone need to work through. Jessica Restaino considers this personal aspect of grief and breastfeeding in her essay "Drained" in the book *Unbuttoned*, explaining, "In many ways that's what getting better was like. It was a breaking away from something

deeply personal, deeply mine.”<sup>3</sup> This “deeply personal” aspect of breastfeeding is felt by almost every mother. It’s our biology that creates it and yet it’s our culture that defines it. If our society tells women that they are being ridiculous for being so emotional when they are unable to breastfeed, then mothers are left feeling badly about the sadness and grief. Restaino states that her “sadness became a source of guilt.”<sup>4</sup> It is so important to recognize your emotions for what they are—sadness, grief, anger, guilt...whatever they may be. Accept them as your own, work through them, and then, most importantly, figure out a way to move past them.

Once you’ve grieved the loss and examined your experience and hopefully better understand what happened, the last steps are to reframe your experience in a positive way and then move forward with intention. While you may never look back on your breastfeeding difficulties with fondness, they are part of your story, your experience. They have added to the person you are today. Perhaps your experience has given you greater empathy, encouraged you to search out new ways to bond with your baby, or brought you new friends you may not otherwise have met. Your difficulties have certainly helped you understand the level of your own persistence and drive, as well as your own limitations. Considering what you have gained, and not just what was lost, can help you move forward with purpose.

## Don’t Overlook What You Have Done

The dedication required to exclusively pump, regardless of how or why you arrived there, is awe-inspiring. It is not an easy feat, but then again, neither is being a mother! If you are grieving the fact that you were unable to breastfeed, recognize that your attempt to breastfeed shows your care. Your determination to try and make it work shows your love. Your willingness to push through the pain and discomfort testifies to your dedication. If

you did all you could given your circumstances, then there is no room for guilt. Regret, yes. But not guilt. Grieve, move on, and learn from your experience.

If your experience is not what you expected, don't overlook the incredible thing you are doing and be sure to recognize the amazing commitment and strength you are exhibiting. Watching your baby growing because of your milk—whether you are able to provide 100% of your baby's nutrition requirements or not—is an incredible thing. *You* are doing that—no one else! Just as you nourished your baby in your womb, you are continuing to nourish him or her outside your womb. And the nourishment will continue. Once you wean your baby from your milk, the nourishment just takes a different form, relying more on love, compassion, guidance, and gentle discipline.

It's easy to point out the ways we feel we have let our children down: things we should have done, or did but shouldn't have. Mommy guilt. This is always going to be part of motherhood. So you weren't able to breastfeed your baby. That is a terrible loss, and one that you need to grieve and move forward from, but it's not the sum total of your value as a mother. Remember to keep it all in perspective. You love your baby, and you do everything possible to give your child the best you can. Sometimes as parents we don't do so well, and other times we are awesome! This is life. Breastfeeding is just another aspect of mothering. It's worth fighting for, and it is wonderful when it works out, but it does not define you as a mother, nor does it define your relationship with your child.

