

Older mums learn hard lesson

Life is stranger than fiction — there's no doubt about it. If someone had told me I'd be a first-time mother at age 43, I'd have ordered them to put down the vodka and stop talking crazy. And if they'd told me my new marriage would end just three years after the birth, I'd have locked up the drinks cabinet and thrown away the key.

The first of these two events sent my inquiring mind into a tailspin, and within days of discovering I was pregnant I went looking for reference-style books written for older first-time mothers. The pickings were slim and finding anything in this genre, written by an Australian, proved as elusive to me as pregnancy had previously been.

The gap in information seemed strangely out of step with the fact that one out of every five women worldwide is now delaying motherhood until age 35 and over.

They are the fastest growing demographic in Britain and the United States, and numbers in Australia have reached a record high. The Australian Bureau of Statistics shows the number of women aged 35-39 having a baby has trebled in the past 30 years. Births to women aged 40-44 have nearly doubled in the past decade.

So, with the birth of my son came the birth of an idea ... to write about becoming a mother later in life. I soon realised I'd have to experience it before I could honestly comment on what it was like.

My better-late-than-never baby is now seven and my journey into motherhood is littered with landmines of regret. Not regret for becoming a mother, but regret for embarking on such a task while being so uninformed.

One of the factors that fogged up my rose-coloured glasses was "adjustment". It wasn't until I started researching that I saw the scope of this issue. Sure, some older women adjust to first-time motherhood with all the grace and ease of a prima ballerina. For many of us, though, it's like dancing with two left feet.

It would seem logical to presume that older women with more life experience, knowledge and resources would find it easier to adjust to the life that being a mother creates. However, there's research pointing towards the opposite being true. A 2008 study headed up by Elizabeth Emmanuel, from Brisbane's Griffith University, revealed that there are many factors adversely affecting successful adjustment. One of key significance is older maternal age.

Midwifery researcher Mary Carolan also found this to be true in her 2003 study on the experiences of first-time older mothers, saying "there is ample evidence to suggest that transition to motherhood among older mothers, particularly first-time mothers, is fraught with difficulty, including increased incidence of postnatal depression".

As the widely accepted stereotype of older mothers is one of a healthy, well educated and more financially secure woman, it may be hard to fathom why the older you are the more difficult adjustment can be. The answer may lie in the fact that becoming a mother requires a woman to make a colossal change.

A pivotal aspect of change is loss, and in a 2006 report by British researchers Nikki Shelton and Sally Johnson aptly titled *I Think Motherhood for Me Was a Bit Like a Double-Edged Sword*:

It's presumed that older women can adjust to motherhood easily but there's research that points towards the opposite being true, writes older mum **Serena Kirby**



Adjustment: Serena Kirby, author of *Better Late Than Never Baby*, with her son, Riley

The Narratives of Older Mothers, motherhood was identified as bringing a loss of autonomy, time



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and control, appearance and sexuality, as well as "a loss of financial independence and occupational identity".

Many women felt that becoming a midlife mother was like undergoing molecular rearrangement. And it's often the case that the more you have to lose — and the more you actually do — the greater the sense of loss.

Studies also show that professional older women are used to being rewarded and acknowledged for their achievements so they usually have a greater sense of self than younger women. They have more established egos, habits, lifestyles and identities, and most are financially independent.

Though some of these things can be seen as beneficial to becoming a mother later, making a speedy transition from selfish to selfless can be as hard as turning

the Titanic. In a 2004 study, Professor Antonia Nelson found, "career is particularly important to many older first-time mothers and it (motherhood) affects them at a whole different level than for younger mothers. The struggle is often emotionally and physically exhausting to blend a previously formed adult lifestyle with a very time consuming new priority, motherhood".

For many of the midlife mother's I interviewed, it wasn't just the identity crisis that muddled the transition into motherhood — it was the sense of isolation and disconnection with the outside world and life BC (before child).

Today's Australian family unit has become increasingly smaller, more isolated (physically and socially) from extended family, and more self-sufficient. The ready-made support network found in many other countries is often lacking here.

As you age, your family unit can be even more dispersed and the result is that older mothers often have little or no support base and can be left to primarily fend for themselves. This is highly relevant as a wide variety of research, including a 2010 study — Maternal Distress: a concept analysis — and a 1995 American study on first-time older mothers shows that isolation and diminished support significantly hinders adjustment.

Fatigue is another underestimated aspect. And as a new, older mother the combination of decreased sleep and increased age can lead to the Mother of all Fatigue.

So important is sleep, that experts say the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Challenger space shuttle disaster and the Chernobyl nuclear accident have all been attributed to human errors in which sleep-deprivation played a role.

As fatigue is a progressive state,

as opposed to short term, a 2003 study by US researcher Nancy Troy revealed that women were more fatigued and less energetic at 14 to 19 months after giving birth than they are at six weeks. A 2003 Scottish study also found that the percentage of new mums complaining of fatigue increased from 42 per cent at two weeks after the birth to 54 per cent 18 months down the track.

Striving for perfection also adds to fatigue because it's both stressful and tiring. Research reveals that older mothers often hold high expectations of themselves and their children and these expectations can be unrealistic and detrimental to a mother's wellbeing. It would also follow that, if there's only one child (as is the case for many midlife mums), those expectations can be amplified.

Today's representations and expectations of mothers as "superwomen", are seen everywhere. Celebrities and entrepreneurial businesswomen feature as the new heroes of motherhood-society and are constantly portrayed in a glowing light. But all we see are their successes and happy smiling faces. We don't see what really goes on behind closed doors (nor do we see the hired help that often makes it all possible).

Thankfully, for every difficult part there may be in becoming a midlife mum there is still the overriding gratitude you gain from having a child later in life. And, while many older women do experience difficulty in early motherhood, research also shows that things usually resolve themselves within two to three years. The trick is surviving until then.

Better Late Than Never Baby — Becoming a Mother Later in Life is available as an ebook on the author's website
www.ThingsIWishIHadKnown.com
Price \$14.90 (epack - all formats)