

FIND OUT ALLYSON DOWNEY'S PLAN FOR ADVANCING YOUR CAREER DURING PREGNANCY AND PARENTHOOD

June 29, 2016

CEO and Co-founder of weeSpring.com, Allyson Downey wrote '[Here's the Plan: Your Practical, Tactical Guide to Advancing Your Career During Pregnancy and Parenthood](#)' for new and expecting parents who want to balance a successful career with committed motherhood. Mother of two, Allyson launched her Techstars-backed startup that helps parents collect advice from their friends about what they need for their baby. Named the 'Yelp for baby products' by InStyle magazine, weeSpring has received praise from TechCrunch, Mashable, CNBC, and the Daily Mail. Allyson firmly believes that having a baby doesn't mean putting your career on hold, but it does take some planning to keep your professional life on track. Learn how pregnancy can impact your performance, the facts about parental leave, managing family life discrimination, dividing childcare responsibilities, and how to be smart as a new mother.

[Purchase Here's the Plan here](#) and join the [weeSpring.com community here!](#)

THIS ISN'T A WOMAN THING. THIS IS AN
EVERYONE THING.

P REPARING FOR PREGNANCY

How can we keep our **careers on track** as expectant and new mothers?

For college-educated women, the average age to have a child is 31. This is typically when you're starting to hit your stride professionally and the inflection point for when your career is about to take off. If that's the time when you have a baby, there's a good chance someone could inadvertently hold you back from fulfilling your potential by making assumptions about what you want or need as an expecting mother. To combat this, you should start preparing really early (you can start in your 20s) to set yourself up for success by building a strong network and speaking up about what you want and what you care about.

That's how I got to where I am in my career. I launched a startup in 2013 called weeSpring, which is like Yelp for baby and kids' products, by tapping into my network and speaking out about what I wanted and cared about. My journey to weeSpring started because I had a terrible experience working on Wall Street with pregnancy discrimination and got shunted out of my job. That, combined with the experience I had building a community on weeSpring, is what led me to write 'Here's the Plan: Your Practical, Tactical Guide to Advancing your Career During Pregnancy and Parenthood.'

How does **pregnancy** impact our health and creating our career?

Going into your pregnancy, there's a chance you might be really, really exhausted—more tired than you've ever felt in your entire life. There's a chance you could have pregnancy complications and need to leave the office early. You could be throwing up in your office waste basket every 25 minutes in the morning. All of those things happen to women and they get through them. It's an obstacle and it's hard, but if you have a clear plan in place, it can reduce your stress and ease the burden for you.

The other thing that can impact expecting or new mothers is something people refer to as 'pregnancy brain' or 'Mommy brain' which reflects how your mental capacity shifts. It doesn't lessen, it's just a little bit different. I tell a story in my book about how I was always a very detail-oriented person. But, when I got back to work, my boss started coming into my office telling me that there were typos in the documents I sent her. I was despondent. I started to think I had peaked in my 20's and that I was destined for mediocrity for the next 20 years of my life.

But what I realized is that it was really just about my focus and I was spectacularly sleep-deprived. No one warns you about the long-term impact of sleep deprivation, but studies have shown that for up to two years after the birth of a child, your ability to respond to cues is roughly the same as someone who has been drinking. It changes the way you focus, and it changes the way you think about things. What was empowering for me to realize was that by not being head down in those details anymore (because I literally couldn't focus on them) it freed me up to think about the bigger picture—and that was around the time I developed the idea for my startup.

IT'S CRUCIAL THAT BOTH MEN AND WOMEN
TAKE LEAVE. THAT'S THE BEST HOPE FOR
PAY EQUALITY IN THE LONG TERM.

What is the **parental leave** landscape and how can we prepare financially?

When I was doing research for 'Here's the Plan,' I asked almost every woman I interviewed what she knew about maternity leave when she first became pregnant. Almost universally, women told me they were shocked to find how little they actually had access to. They had heard terms like FMLA, which is the Family Medical Leave Act, and assumed that afforded them *12 weeks of paid leave*. FMLA affords you job protection and leave for 12 weeks, but there's no pay included. Plus, FMLA only covers 60 percent of the workforce. If you work for a small business or a company that's exempt from FMLA, you don't even have protected leave. You might have to go back to work two weeks after you have a baby or even two weeks after having a C-section.

For women, and men as well, setting money aside from an early age can make a huge difference. Even if you do have some paid leave, it's rare that it covers 100% of your salary for 12 weeks—and I've heard from many women that 12 weeks is really what they needed to recover and settle into a new rhythm. The reason I care so much about parental leave is because it sets a woman up for failure in the workplace and in her domestic life if she's the only one taking leave to care for a new baby. It's crucial that both men and women take leave. I love it when I hear that companies like Etsy, change.org, and Facebook offer equal leave to men and women. That's the best hope for pay equality in the long term.

What should our expectations be for our **careers with a newborn**?

Before I had a baby, I had heard from my friends that having a newborn was hard, but I didn't know exactly what was hard. Sure, you're going to be tired and settling into a new reality, but my world was rocked. One of my friends told me it was like being in a war zone and he had lived in Iraq and Afghanistan, so he knew what he was talking about. He said you have to be ready to jump out of bed prepared for a crisis at any moment, and that level of hyper-alertness for a sustained period of time during which you are only sleeping in two-hour increments is jarring to the system.

Having a newborn is definitely hard. It's different for every woman, and the recovery period after giving birth manifests differently for every woman and every baby. I was a wreck after my first child was born, but when my second child was born, I was taking her out to dinner when she was three days old. It's about preparation—preparing for the worst and hoping for the best, and not being too hard on yourself.

Being a mother to a newborn can be incredibly isolating. And that's another thing women aren't quite as prepared for—how lonely it can feel to spend your day in seclusion with a tiny baby who can't talk back to you and usually isn't smiling at you. Getting out and building relationships with other new mothers is helpful. Find a new mother support group, join a playgroup, or go to baby yoga. Even if you wind up sitting in the corner the whole time nursing your baby, it's nice to be around other adults.

Then, as you transition back into work, you have to go easy on yourself. You will get back to your original capacity, but it's not going to happen overnight. Women spend a lot of time, as one of my friends said, 'shoulding on ourselves,' talking about what we 'should have done better' or what we 'should have done in time.' Try to reduce all of those shoulds and celebrate the things *you have done*.

Spend 15 minutes at the end of every week writing down the things you've accomplished. That's really valuable when you start your career (and definitely when you have a new baby) because it allows you to reflect on what you've done. Then you can go back to that list six months down the line when it's time for your performance review and have a really clear outline of all of the amazing things you've accomplished.

IF YOU WANT TO WORK, THEN YOU HAVE
TO FIND A WAY TO AFFORD CHILDCARE,
BECAUSE IT'S AN INVESTMENT IN YOUR
LONG-TERM CAREER.

How can we identify pregnancy or family responsibility **discrimination**?

I wrote 'Here's the Plan,' because I had a terrible experience with pregnancy discrimination and I didn't know where to find information about it. I thought I was an anomaly. I thought this was something that happened only to me, or something that I had done to fail, and maybe I was in the one percent, or maybe even the three percent. But when I did research for 'Here's the Plan,' I reached out to thousands of women, and asked them if they had ever experienced pregnancy discrimination or family responsibilities discrimination. 15% said yes, they had, and another 15% said they experienced something that might have been discrimination. Whether it was not getting a promotion, having less responsibility when they got back to work, not making as much money, or getting a terrible performance review when they had great performance reviews before they had babies, discrimination manifests in so

many different ways and there's so much ambiguity as to whether it's pregnancy discrimination.

On top of that, there's what I call 'benevolent discrimination,' which is when someone sets out to do you a favor, and they wind up harming your career on the side. This happens so frequently, and it happens from people who are feminists, egalitarian, well-meaning, and supportive. They don't even realize that they're discriminating against you, but they're washing away your opportunities by making assumptions about what you want and what you need.

I advocate for speaking up for yourself and speaking up about what you want. It doesn't even have to be in relation to your pregnancy. You can just say, 'Here's my goal. For the next six months, I would like to be able to do these three things to help me achieve that goal. Can we make it happen?'

WATCH ALLYSON'S BSMART INTERVIEW
HERE!

I WROTE 'HERE'S THE PLAN,' BECAUSE I
HAD A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE WITH
PREGNANCY DISCRIMINATION AND DIDN'T
KNOW WHERE TO FIND INFORMATION
ABOUT IT.

P LANNING OUR PROFESSION

What is the time and financial **cost of childcare** and how can we prepare?

Some recent articles have pointed out that the cost of childcare and daycare has outpaced the cost of college in some cities. Childcare is a very burdensome expense, costing thousands of dollars per month in many cases. And even when childcare is considered affordable, it's still the second largest expense that any family has after their mortgage.

Women make this calculation and think to themselves, 'Well, 70% of my after-tax paycheck is getting eaten up by the cost of childcare. Should I even go back to work at all? Should I just stay home with my kids? Am I only working for 200 bucks a week after the cost of childcare?' That's a completely understandable line of thinking. If you want to be with your child and bond with your child, why would you pay someone most of your paycheck to do that for you?

Often it's not a question about whether you want to be home with your child, it's a question of whether you can afford it. If you want to work, then you have to find a way to afford childcare, because it's an investment in your long-term career. If you're only taking home 30% of your paycheck after taxes, five years from now when you've had raises, promotions, you've grown in your career, and your kids are going to school all day, you won't have that child-care burden anymore. It can hold you back if you spent that time at home because childcare was too expensive when you wanted to work.

What are your tips for **dividing childcare** responsibility with a partner?

My advice to families and couples is to think in terms of responsibilities rather than tasks, and divide up the *responsibilities*. If a responsibility becomes something you own or your partner owns, the *thinking work* (like researching preschools for your child or planning what you're going to have for dinner next week) gets enveloped into that. You can also benefit by writing down what each partner's responsibilities are. By putting it on paper, you get a sense of visualizing just how much work goes into running your family.

This is something that's valuable to do even before you're married so that you can start these habits and patterns of equality and shared labor. It's really empowering to see what you are and are not doing so you don't have to micromanage every aspect, which is what happens for a lot of women when they go back to work after being on maternity leave. I have a worksheet on my website herestheplanbook.com that outlines many of the small tasks that go into taking care of a baby. You can start to divide this up by responsibility as well.

THE COST OF CHILDCARE AND DAYCARE
HAS OUTPACED THE COST OF COLLEGE IN
SOME CITIES.

What should our expectations be for **productivity when returning to work?**

A lot of women return to the office after taking parental leave and expect that they're going to be able to jump right back into the swing of things. I don't mean to be discouraging (because you'll absolutely get there), but it's important to go easy on yourself and recognize that if you've been away from work for three months, it takes a little bit of time to ramp back up. Plus, you're still dealing with severe sleep deprivation. Even if your baby is now sleeping through the night (which is rare at three months), only sleeping in two-hour increments for the first couple months of your baby's life really takes a toll on you.

Your ability to focus, concentrate, and sometimes word recall can be a little bit diminished. It's easy to feel like you're never going to get it back, but I'm here to promise you that you will get it back, and eventually you'll start to get back into that routine. What's most important is to go easy on yourself for that stretch of time, celebrate your wins and successes, and try to avoid being critical of yourself.

What is your advice for how mothers can be **leaders in their industry?**

The most powerful thing anyone can do to advance their career is to build a strong network. That's something you can start doing as soon as you graduate college, or even before graduating college. That network is going to stay with you for the rest of your career and it's going to be there for you if you have a terrible experience (like mine), or when you're ready to move onto your next job. It's going to be there for you when you're bringing in new hires to your own company and you're staffing up your own team.

Investing in that network from the beginning is the most powerful way to advance your own career. I bring this up with women, particularly mothers, because a lot of people equate networking with showing up at some industry event and exchanging business cards. As a mother, you don't really have time for that anymore. You're now constrained by childcare hours and you're tired. You want to see your baby at night and put your baby to bed.

I advocate networking by making connections with other people. If you think about a cell phone network or a social network, it's all connections. It's not about just showing up, but rather thinking about who you know, and how they could be helpful to each other. If you're

thoughtful in the introductions you make, you're getting two favors for the price of one—you've helped two people who are then going to feel compelled at some later date to do something to help you.

THINK IN TERMS OF RESPONSIBILITIES
RATHER THAN TASKS, AND DIVIDE UP THE
RESPONSIBILITIES.

How can we **be smart** supporting other mothers as a co-worker or boss?

If you want to support the mothers and expectant mothers around you, the best thing you can do is *not make assumptions about what they want*. You can help them, but make sure they know you're helping them. If you think something is a favor, check your assumption about whether it really is doing them a favor. Have an open dialogue and ask them, what can I do to help and support you?

For many people, the intersection of work and family is a topic that managers and employers are fearful of talking about because they're afraid they're going to say something that's going to get them in trouble. And employees are afraid to talk about it because they don't want to give someone the wrong impression.

But what's ironic is that the quickest and easiest way for someone to get the wrong impression about you is if you give them no impression at all. So be vocal about what you want and bring it out into the open. This isn't a woman thing. This is an everyone thing.

THE MOST POWERFUL THING ANYONE CAN
DO TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREER IS TO
BUILD A STRONG NETWORK.

S POTLIGHT ON ALLYSON DOWNEY

Neighborhood: Boulder, CO (Formerly Upper West Side!)

Occupation: Entrepreneur

Twitter: @allysondowney

Instagram: @allysondowney

Dream Mentor: Michelle Obama. She's tough, cool, authentic, and brilliant -- oh, and stylish. I just had the opportunity to see her at the White House United State of Women Summit, and she was introduced by a high school student who was her mentee. I was blown away by that teenager's grace, poise, and presence.

Favorite Store: I do Stitch Fix (I hate shopping for clothes, so love having a box of personally-selected clothes show up at my house.

Go-to Outfit: Skinny jeans and a tunic, with a statement necklace and Ja-Vie ballet flats.

Must-have Shoes: I have about six pairs of Ja-Vies, all in different colors.

Favorite Nail Polish: Essie Mademoiselle

Signature Scent: Jo Malone Orange Blossom

Beauty Essential: Aesop Fabulous Face Oil

Cocktail of Choice: Penicillin, which I first had at Little Branch but found it at Frasca in Boulder (With a hat tip on the menu to Milk & Honey, where they got the recipe).

Travel Destination: Cape Town

Current Craving: Great sushi... now that I'm landlocked, it's harder to find.

Favorite App: Sitter.Me

College / University: Colby College and Columbia University