



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 10 - The Conversation You're Not Having – Part 2: The Fourth Trimester, Parental Leave, and Reengaging After Leave

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MAY 2022

Amanda Cipriano: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Amanda Cipriano, an Associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at [lowenstein.com/podcasts](https://www.lowenstein.com/podcasts), or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Rachel Dikovics: Welcome back to the Women's Initiative Network: "Real Talk." This is part two of our discussion about navigating pregnancy, miscarriages, and returning to work. If you haven't listened to part one, we encourage you to go back and do that first before you listen to this episode so you have the whole context. As a sensitivity warning to our listeners, this discussion is again, going to touch on navigating issues beyond those that come with quote, unquote, normal pregnancies and maternity leaves, including miscarriage, pregnancy complications, and infant loss. We hope that you'll enjoy part two of this episode, and we're going to be talking about the importance of maternity leave, re-engaging after a maternity leave, and advice for anything differently we'd do in the future.

Amanda Cipriano: What are your overall impressions of how the legal industry views maternity and even paternity leave? And then why do you think maternity leave was so important for you?

Megan Monson: So I'll start on this one. I think it's really important to encourage men to take paternity leave, because I think one of the things that as women, we go out on leave, we don't want to feel that we're quote unquote being set back in our career because we're out of the swing of things for 4, 5, 6 months. And by having men have the opportunity to not only take advantage of that leave, I think it helps balance that potential inequity that we may feel, but also it gives men, frankly, the benefit that we are getting in terms of having that opportunity to bond with our children during that leave period. So I think not only does it help balance things professionally, but it also helps again, kind of set an equal playing field for everybody by giving them the same benefits.

And I'll just add, in terms of taking leave, for me it was really important to take leave and to take the full leave that the firm offered, not only for healing from birth physically, getting used to being a mother, but bonding with my daughter because it's a time you're not going to get back and your job will

always be there. And so I think it's great that Lowenstein and other firms are starting to have more generous leave policies for both men and women, because you can't get that time back with your children when they're that young. And you're learning how to navigate through a host of different things. And also seeing all the women who've successfully done it and become re-engaged and returned to work and continue to have successful careers, I think is really important to use those women as role models in terms of advancing your career and just reintegrating after returning.

Rachel Dikovics: Also, I just want to throw in that Megan is generously joining us during her maternity leave. So her presence here does not mean she's back, so don't anybody get any ideas.

But I'll add in, just chime in on that is the reason I am, while I've been disconnected the entire leave and I've been very fortunate about that. This topic is so near and dear to my heart, and I really wanted to get this conversation out there so other women can learn from our experiences.

Nicole Fulfree: Absolutely agree. And Amanda, with respect to your question about what does maternity leave mean to me? I mean, I think you're going to have to put a timer on me because I just cannot speak enough to how important maternity leave is and how I wish more firms would follow Lowenstein's lead in giving a generous policy. Because I know I had a little bit of a different situation than many people may have, but even regardless of what I experienced, I think that having this time is so, so important for the entire family, the mom and the baby in particular. It's just a super important bonding time. People say that when a baby is born, a mother's also born. And like I said before, it's just such a transformative time, you're learning how to change the entire life you've led up until this point, which is focused on yourself, to be completely focused on another human being and learning how to do things in life with that new approach.

I mean, you have to learn how to go to sleep with a baby, how to feed the baby, how to feed yourself while you're feeding a baby. It's just such a life changing experience that you need that time to kind of come into your new self and learn how to just be. Besides that point, I mean, your baby is so small and I love my daughter and she's wonderful, but babies are a little blob for the first 12 weeks of their lives. They are not smiling back at you, they're not really interacting with you much. You're just caring for a beautiful little blob. And so the thought of leaving that beautiful little blob at daycare or with a nanny or whatever childcare you have lined up, it becomes a lot more difficult when you're doing it at that early stage. And so giving that additional time makes it easier. At least it did for me to leave my daughter with someone.

Besides all that, just physically, they call it the fourth trimester for a reason, it's actually still part of pregnancy. Which a lot of people don't think of it that way, but mentally and physically, you are not the same. And this is a professional podcast so I will spare you the gory details of what happens after you give birth. But if you're someone who's sitting there thinking maternity leave isn't necessary or it's not a big deal, I will direct you to Ali Wong's comedy special called *Hard Knock Wife*, and it shares the gory

details. Please listen to it, if you are a nonbeliever, check it out and I think it might change your mind.

A lot happens to you and you need time to heal. Personally, I gained over 50 pounds in my first pregnancy, and this is just long down the list of things that are concerns for postpartum moms. But I didn't fit into any of my clothes for five months and just learning what fit my body and those types of things are super stressful for someone who's learning to come into their own. And so for all those reasons and so many more, I just think I can't impress upon everyone how important a lengthy, appropriately lengthy maternity leave is.

Megan Monson: Just to add one more point to that. At least for me in those first 12 weeks, my daughter wasn't sleeping through the night. Thankfully now she is, but I couldn't imagine trying to be up in the middle of the night multiple times feeding her, changing her, and then getting up early and working a job where you have to be on your A-game all the time and your mind just needs to be sharp. I was just not operating at that level with that level of sleep deprivation on a constant rotating basis. And so that to me, is another reason that it's really important to have a lengthier maternity leave and to take it, because then you can start taking better care of yourself and seeing how you can be both a mom and a working professional operating at a high capacity as we have to.

Amanda Cipriano: And I address this question to Nicole. Do you have any tips for re-engaging after coming back from a leave? And then addressed to everyone, is there anything you would do differently in the future?

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, so for me, I think what was helpful was keeping in touch with my department leader while I was on maternity leave. I have a great department leader who was in touch with me, just to kind of to check on Savannah and how she was doing. But in addition to that, I was talking to him about when I thought I was coming back. I mentioned, I delayed my return date and I'd spoken with him about when I thought I would be coming back and that was helpful for him and the rest of the department to keep me in mind and what I could be staffed on given the timing. And so that was really helpful because I kind of felt connected in that way and just keeping in touch with my coworkers, not about cases at all, but just sending them pictures and keeping in touch.

And so I kind of felt like I had never left once I returned. I think that it's hard when you return and Lowenstein gives you this ramp up period where your expectation is 80% of hours, which is helpful to take a little bit of the stress off as you're returning and learning how to fit your new life into your work schedule. And so that's helpful in taking a little bit of the stress off and I think naturally as you return, you're building back up your docket slowly. And so that's, naturally it just is helpful to kind of come back and just work your way up.

And for everyone it's different as far as balancing, you kind of just have to learn what works. If you have your childcare in place, sharing the duties with my husband, it was a bit of a learning curve, but he's great and luckily he takes on a lot of the duties and so we were able to figure it out slowly, but

that ramp up period was pretty helpful for me in returning, slowly but surely building back up my docket.

Another thing that I found really helpful in re-engaging after returning from leave is setting clear boundaries. I think when I came back, I was nervous that people would think that I wasn't willing to put in as much hard work because I was caring for an infant. And I think one of the things that made both me and my colleagues feel better about that issue was that, for me personally with the working from home set up, I would try to take off from 5:30 to 7:30 to do dinner, bath time, and bedtime. And then if necessary, and often it was, I would return back to my computer at about 7:30, after that time was up. And so I just communicated that to the people that I was working with, which made me feel better about being away from my computer, knowing that people would know where I was and that I would be back to finish up anything if I needed to.

So that was one thing that really helped me feel a little bit less guilty. I feel like I got time with my daughter during the week that I needed and also would leave my colleagues with a sound mind about me being available and not just being missing. So that was one thing that I feel like was helpful for me. So with respect to the question about, would I do anything differently in the future? I think when I first told people that I was going out on maternity leave, most people just said, "Congratulations, that's great," but some people did ask me if I knew my return date and I kind of felt obligated to let them know what the return date would be, but I would recommend against that. And like I said, some of the reasons that I was fearful about letting people know about my pregnancy was because I didn't know how I was going to feel after I became a mom and after I had my baby. And so for those reasons, I think that you should keep your return date to yourself.

Nicole Fulfree:

I think most people will assume at this point that you'll take the entire leave, at least at our firm I think that's the assumption. But unless anyone directly asks you what your return date will be, if it's like your department chair, you can discuss it with them. But even so, I would caution you to say that you'll let them know as you get closer, to confirm, because again, you're not going to know how you feel and I think it can be a source of stress to kind of tie yourself to a very specific date when you're going through such a big transformation.

Rachel Dikovics:

In terms of things I would do differently, I don't think from a professional perspective, I would do anything differently. I think from a personal perspective, I probably will be a little more cautious in the future only because one of the things that was hard for me was feeling like other people were disappointed when I told them what happened. And while everybody was great and supportive, I didn't feel like I wanted to manage other people's emotions in addition to my own. So I think personally, I probably will not share the news as much as I did in the future.

But professionally, I don't think I would do anything differently. I was really blown away by how supportive people were. I kind of thought that given that it was pretty early, I didn't know if people would be kind of dismissive, it's hard to know how people will react to something like that. And I think,

especially for the men that I told, I feel like sometimes they really don't know what to say. And so I wasn't sure how people would react to that, but it was a really positive experience in the sense that people were so supportive and just understanding. So from a professional aspect, I wouldn't do anything differently,

Megan Monson: Similar to Rachel I think at this point, I wouldn't do anything differently either if I did have a subsequent pregnancy, because I've gone through three relatively recently, I've learned from the mistakes I made the first time around and kind of corrected that with my most recent pregnancy and was comfortable both with how I handled it professionally and personally. And one thing I would just say in terms of the conversation on re-engaging after coming back from a leave or balancing your mom duties with your professional duties, try to leverage the other women in your network too. I know for me, talking to Nicole about this because she's just gone through it is extremely valuable, and just learning while everyone's path is going to be different but seeing what others have done, kind of gives you some helpful tidbits that you can use in particular for me, as I'm starting to think about coming back in the next five or six weeks.

Nicole Fulfree: Okay, everyone. So thanks for joining us for this episode of The Women's Initiative Network's "Real Talk." We know this was a really personal discussion, but we hope it will help our friends, colleagues, and listeners know that whatever they may experience related to pregnancy, they're not alone. The more we're willing to talk about these issues, the less stigmatized they will become and the more supported our women will feel. Until next time.

Amanda Cipriano: Thank you for listening to today's episode. Please subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Lowenstein Sandler podcast series is presented by Lowenstein Sandler and cannot be copied or rebroadcast without consent. The information provided is intended for a general audience. It is not legal advice or substitute for the advice of counsel. Prior results do not guarantee a similar outcome. The content reflects the personal views and opinions of the participants. No attorney client relationship is being created by this podcast and all rights are reserved.