

MEH



ABOUT MOTHERHOOD

Look at that face. What does it make you feel?

(a) A womb-deep ache of longing. (b) 'Not for me, thanks.'
Or (c) nothing at all. Here, one confused writer explores maternal instinct in an attempt to discover why she feels zero desire to become a parent, but struggles to give up on the future she always assumed she would one day want

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There's a note on my iPhone titled 'motherhood'. Sometimes I tap out my thoughts on it when I'm on the bus home from work. Should I happen to be sitting behind a baby mid-meltdown, I'll commit the cadence of its cries to iCloud memory before it dims in my own. A second-hand story about a third-degree tear, the cost of raising a child in London that reads like a lottery jackpot – it's all there. So is the moment I tumbled head over heels in auntie love with my newborn nephew. A scientific approach to what could be the most important choice I'll ever make, it isn't. But in the absence of any kind of biological inclination that would make the decision easy for me, it's all I've got to go on...

ON THE FENCE

I'm 30.3 years old – the age the average woman in England and Wales will have her first child – and I'm ticking boxes. I'm in a happy relationship with a man who knows his way around a Nigel Slater cookbook. We live together. There is talk of getting a cat. But the next box is the one marked 'parent' – and filling it presents a problem. While most millennial women in the UK today will become mothers, one in five will reach the age of 45 without procreating. And somewhere between these two tribes is a fence with a group of women sitting on it. We have a fondness for particular baby names even though we might never need them; we could win awards for our ability to subject-swerve when relatives bring up the 'b' word, and if you see one of us cooing over a tiny human, sorry, but there's a chance we're faking it.

'When I said at 18 that I didn't see myself having children, people insisted, "You'll want them by 25." At 25 when my feelings hadn't changed, they smirked and said, "Just wait till you hit 30." Well, I'm 33 now and I still don't want kids. Will I ever?' This is Claire*, an HR manager from Leeds, who says she's 70% sure she doesn't want children. Her list of reasons reads like the note on my iPhone: never again experiencing the joy of a weekend spent entirely alone; childbirth horror stories; being broke for the next 18 years; fear of ending up

raising a child alone if her relationship crumbles under the strain. 'Do other people have these fears but choose to have children anyway?' Claire asks. 'Or does the fact that I'm having these thoughts mean I shouldn't be a parent? Is this normal? Or am I overthinking everything?' They're the same questions I ask whenever I watch a woman formerly known as my 3am tequila buddy march down the path marked motherhood with barely a cursory glance back over her shoulder. It's maternal instinct, not the deep connection that's said to kick in the moment you hold the human you've created (health willing) but the stuff that comes before the birth, before the pregnancy, before the point of conception. When I ask my childless friends how they feel when they look at a baby, I get a rush of responses: 'a sucker punch to the stomach'; 'butterflies in my womb'; 'a positive period pain'. I'm met with so much enthusiasm I'm embarrassed to admit I can't relate. Why is mine MIA?

GUT REACTION

I need to know if there is any biological basis for maternal instinct. There could be. But it's more likely to kick in when you *smell* a baby, rather than see one. A 2013 study published in *Frontiers In Psychology* was the first to investigate the existence of chemosensory signals between non-mothers and newborns. New mothers and non-mothers were asked to smell pyjamas worn by two-day-old babies and researchers found the brain's reward centre (the same area triggered by cheesy

chips and the like) was activated regardless of their parental status. 'We don't know if this baby smell is a single substance or a combination of odours,' explains Dr Johannes Frasnelli, professor at Quebec University who worked on the study. 'Currently we can only speculate as to why this ubiquitous reaction exists, but historically, women routinely died in childbirth, leaving their child to be cared for by another, so from an evolutionary perspective it makes sense that this attachment exists in non-mothers, too.' Maybe this accounts for the cosy feeling you can experience while cradling a sleeping baby without the visceral urge to procreate yourself.

Biologist Dr Ana Ribeiro believes maternal instinct is down to your DNA, rather than being hardwired into every woman. Her research into the mothering behaviour of mice has led to the discovery of a 'maternal gene'. 'We found that the presence or absence of a receptor in a certain area of the brain was critical for the expression of maternal behaviour,' Dr Ribeiro explains. 'In other words, without this gene, the skills to be "a good mother" were lost in female mice.' And, she says, the same is true of female humans. Could I just be missing a chromosome? Well, no. 'Every woman will have this gene, but you'll have a different "expression" of it to other women your age,' she adds. 'This is partly based on epigenetic changes – or imprinting – where the gene's expression is influenced



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by the mother. But it's also influenced by your environment.' It means my upbringing has influenced the degree to which my motherhood gene is 'switched on'. And, according to Dr Ribeiro – motherhood prowess aside – when it comes to the factors driving my maternal desire, many more non-genetic factors will come into play.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Nature versus nurture; genes versus memes. Studies suggest that everything from my place in the family (youngest child) to the amount of time I've spent around babies to date (little to none) could influence my maternal instinct – or lack of it. Researchers from Kansas State University were the first to explore the visceral desire to have a baby from a psychological perspective, accounting for evolutionary, neurological and hormonal factors. They identified three factors that strongly and consistently influenced whether participants wanted to become parents: positive exposure (cuddling a baby or the sight of cute baby clothes), negative exposure (a baby screaming or a child having a tantrum) and trade-offs (loss of freedom, spiralling costs, biological trauma, yada yada). 'It was interesting that these positive factors and negative factors were orthogonal,' – that is, considered to be separate issues – 'which means some people can feel positively and negatively about having children at the same time,' explains Gary Brase, the study's co-author. It means that the crying baby on the bus does nothing to dilute the sight of my sleeping nephew.

And these are just the influences I'm conscious of; others have been seeping into my psyche while I've been otherwise occupied, according to author Laura Carroll. A determination to discover why society finds the child-free choice so hard to accept led her to write *The Baby Matrix* (I was so engrossed, I missed my bus stop). 'I looked for solid, indisputable evidence that could point towards biological processes that create the desire to want a child,' she says. 'When I couldn't find any, I turned the focus of my research to cultural and social influences.' From the saccharine all-works-out-in-the-end depiction of parenthood on screen to the 'poor single, childless Jen-An' narrative, this stuff is everywhere. And there's a word for it: pro-natalism. 'As far back as Roman times, women were actively encouraged to have more children so that the population would grow and society flourish,'



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Carroll explains. 'Over the centuries, the belief that women long for motherhood has become so deeply ingrained in our social and cultural hardware that we've reached the point where we think it's part of who we are; that parenthood reflects a "normal" life.'

It does feel like the status quo is shifting – we have child-free role models from Theresa May to Kylie Minogue, and the impact of surging populations on the planet is real. But Carroll argues that the expansion of the digital world has meant pregnancy and motherhood are being glamorised more than ever before. Ah yes, the full-scale production that is the Facebook baby announcement and the subsequent composed Instagram shots (#mumlife).

KICKING IN

It feels like a penny might have dropped. I grew up assuming I'd have kids 'one day'. I used 'when' rather than 'if'. And all in the absence of any desire to procreate. 'The word "instinct" is muddying the waters,' explains Dr Gillian Ragsdale, a biological anthropologist who teaches psychology with the Open University. 'An instinct is hardwired. What we're actually talking about here is a *drive*, which is a force motivated by your environment. Humans aren't animals – even if you do feel a drive to reproduce, you can override it. You can make a decision based on your current situation.'

The theory fits. Show me a woman who feels her maternal instinct 'kicking in' and I'll show you a woman who perceives her ducks to be in a row. This is the case for Cat, a special needs teacher from South London. Like me, she's 30.3. 'I always thought I probably wanted kids, but in the past few months, that changed from "maybe at some point" to "I could do this now",' she explains. 'I'm no more soppy about babies than the next person. The strength of feeling I have is based on the bigger picture – I feel ready to move to the next stage of my relationship with my boyfriend; I finished my master's last year; I'm in the job I want. I feel very aware of the shift in my mindset.'

But if the 'ready on paper' circumstances of your twenties, thirties and, yes, forties, can make the decision easy, they can also make it a headfuck. For Claire, there's more to it than a solid list of cons. 'I'm in a relationship with the most incredible man I've ever met. I want to be with him forever and he feels the same way. But he wants children; it's a deal-breaker

for him,' she says. 'There were moments when I wondered if we should get involved at all. But I knew he was special and I didn't want to throw it away in case my biological clock kicks in like everyone says it will. Maybe it's foolish to keep sweeping it under the carpet. But equally I feel like there's no point agonising over it now because if in two years I'm suddenly floored by a desperate desire to have kids, all this stress and worry will have been for nothing. Deep down, I'm praying that will happen – because otherwise I'll have to face up to losing the love of my life.'

KID-LOCK

I should be able to decide. I'm lucky enough to be in circumstances that enable motherhood; to live in a time and place where I have the privilege of agonising over the decision; I might even be lucky enough to be fertile. I feel guilty, confused and stuck. I need some clarity. I need it so much I actually google the word – and I stumble upon Ann Davidman. A clarity coach, she

'I grew up assuming I'd have kids one day – in the absence of any actual desire to procreate'

helps potential parents unpick the myriad biological, cultural and social influences that have brought them to this point.

'When you're trying to figure out what you want and what you're going to do, you find yourself in a kind of gridlock,' Davidman explains over Skype from her California home. 'You're probably feeling shame over feeling unsure; fear over making the wrong choice and regretting it down the line; guilt over failing to meet the expectations of others. That conflict can feel torturous.'

Her first question catches me off guard. 'Answer quickly; the first thing that comes into your head,' she says. 'Do you want to be a mother?' 'Yes,' I blurt out. Oh. But I'm wiser than I was last week. Isn't this just my pro-natalist upbringing talking? 'It could be. When I asked you that question you teared up a little; there was a gut reaction there. But that reaction could be based on deeper stuff you may not be aware of.' We talk – and I'm

surprised by what I say. We talk about my history of anxiety and depression, and my worry that motherhood would cause those conditions to resurface. We talk about my perfectionism, and my deep-seated fear that I'm simply not cut out for a child. We talk about my boyfriend – the best human I know – who wants to be a father one day, and what a decision not to have children would mean for our relationship. 'In order to access your true feelings, you need to isolate this decision and pick it apart in a way that accounts for your core values,' Davidman explains. I cry, but I hang up feeling a little lighter – and make a mental note to give her number to Claire.

I have my homework. But I suspect that the 97 bus isn't the ideal setting for accessing my core values. In search of more sophisticated methodology, I call decision-making expert and author of *The SHED Method: Making Better Choices When It Matters*, Sara Milne Rowe. I tell her about the note on my phone. She isn't impressed. 'By all means weigh up the pros and cons, but when you're in a hurry, distracted by other things and in that to-do list mindset, you're missing out on the deep reflection a decision of this magnitude requires,' she says. Her book is based on the theory that in order to make a good decision

you first need to fix the fundamentals of wellness – sleep, hydration, exercise and diet. Once you've nailed healthy habits, build in time for quiet reflection. 'Start with just five minutes every day and dedicate that time to letting whatever thoughts are there come to the surface,' adds Milne Rowe. 'Build this into your routine and you'll become much better at accessing your true feelings on a decision.'

I have her words in my ear as I pull up the note marked 'motherhood' for the final time. I'm no closer to picking a side. But something has shifted. I'm giving myself the time, space and permission to be unsure until the day that I'm not – whichever side of the fence I fall on. I hit delete, I get off the bus and I walk the rest of the way home. Clarity might still be a way off, but I'm getting closer. **WH**



HOW TO **MAKE A GOOD DECISION**

*Sara Milne Rowe,
author of *The Shed
Method*, on how to
go from stuck to sure*

FIRST, NAIL THE FUNDAMENTALS

You need energy to make an important decision so if your sleep, nutrition or fitness are off-kilter, don't even try. Fix the fundamentals and then you can begin to comprehend the implications of your choice.

STOP COMPARING

Engage with social media or others' experiences when you're trying to access what you really want and not only will you be distracted, you'll be distracted by something that isn't even real. Detox if you need to.

TIME TRAVEL

It can be helpful to jump into the future if you feel stuck. Fast-forward to a time when you've made the decision. What does that look like? How does it feel? How does it sit with your values? This frees you from the blocks standing in your way right now and helps you access what you truly want.

BUILD IN TIME FOR DAILY REFLECTION

Carve out some time every day to allow your thoughts on the matter to surface – it can be as simple as getting off the bus a stop early and giving that time to reflection. Find a few minutes, and make it a habit.