

GUILT BE GONE!

If breastfeeding hasn't worked out, **SIMONE CASEY** has these mindful strategies for bottle-feeding with confidence

Making the decision to stop breastfeeding is a very personal choice and one often fraught with mixed feelings. While some mums are confident in accepting the new way in which their baby will be fed, others – especially those who had high hopes of breastfeeding – may feel as though they've 'failed' as they turn to bottle-feeding. Some women may feel relief but also guilt whenever they pull out a bottle, and many mums also feel like they're being criticised for their choice.

Whatever your reason for turning to bottle-feeding, it's important to allow yourself to feel these emotions so that you can process them and move on with the beautiful (and challenging!) gift that is motherhood. It's also so important to realise that whether you've tried your hardest to make breastfeeding work and had no luck, or have decided that bottle-feeding works best for your family for another reason, this is okay. You're doing what's needed and that's what being a mum is all about.

DO AWAY WITH SELF-CRITICISM

Women who stop breastfeeding often feel disappointed in themselves, says Honor Newman, a psychologist from TLC Birth and Beyond, a service with a special interest in helping mums before and after bub's birth. "The sadness could be related to feeling 'unfeminine' or that they've 'failed' as women to a certain extent," she explains. One such woman is mum-of-three Victoria Pollock, who gave up breastfeeding her first child when her baby was battling poor weight gains. "I was my biggest critic," she says, looking back. "I don't think anyone truly cared whether I breastfed or bottle-fed but I felt disappointed in my lack of breastfeeding success and I was feeling sensitive about my parenting in general, this being my first baby. No-one seemed to understand my grief, they just said, 'Oh well, at least you have formula'. I couldn't look at a bottle without feeling that sense of sadness and disappointment."

What Victoria was feeling is very common and "very difficult to deal with", Honor acknowledges. "Things that can

help are allowing yourself to grieve for the lost breastfeeding relationship as well as to become aware of all the things you are doing well as a mum, so that breastfeeding does not become the defining feature of motherhood or womanhood." Always remember that you've tried and are now doing what is best for your individual situation.

CUT THE PRESSURE FROM FAMILY & FRIENDS

Those dearest to us can cut us the most deeply. Sometimes it's just a look or an offhanded quip from a good mate, aunty, parent or in-law, but if you're already feeling sensitive about the choice you've made in feeding your baby, these can really hurt. In Honor's work with mums and mums-to-be, she helps develop their assertiveness skills so they're better able to deal with unwanted judgement and criticism from others. These are the people closest to you, so get in the habit of speaking honestly about your situation and how their words and looks are affecting you. And if the criticism continues to come, it may be that you need to temporarily distance yourself from that certain person for a time.

"Another thing I think is useful is for people to repeat the mantra, 'It's about them, it's not about me' silently to themselves whenever they're faced with what feels like judgement or negativity," Honor says. "It can also be hugely helpful to realise that your friends and family are commenting from their own life experiences, generation and upbringing. These strategies can be helpful for all aspects of parenting."

FORGET WHAT STRANGERS THINK

Common sense tells us that looks or comments from random people in the street, including other mothers, shouldn't affect us too much – but it's all too easy to obsess over incidents that happen, or to worry about what might happen or even what others may be thinking in their heads.

Even though no-one ever openly criticised or commented on Nycole Wood's >

bottle-feeding, "I was constantly imagining everything negative people must have been thinking about me," the mum-of-one says. "I felt the need to explain to total strangers the lengths we had gone in trying to breastfeed, as if trying to legitimise it to myself."

Honor has counselled mums who have been openly judged for bottle-feeding by people they don't know (and points out that she's also seen plenty of mums criticised for breastfeeding). Whatever the judgement, it's important to understand, Honor says, that "this is because people have different ideals and believe their way is 'right' and other ways are not. The judgement is something that will not go away, but mums can choose how they react to it. Making a conscious effort to not take it personally is important."

In the moment a short and simple reply that disempowers your would-be critic could be all that's needed. Try something along the lines of, "Thanks for your concern, but you don't know our whole story". Otherwise, just smile and move away.



DON'T FEAR TAKE TWO

When breastfeeding doesn't work with your first baby, it doesn't mean the same scenario will unfold with any subsequent bubbas you have. Although some women are very happy to stick with bottle-feeding their next babies, others have another go at breastfeeding, often with a very different outcome. "A mum could definitely go on to breastfeed the next time and I would



SAYING 'NO' TO GUILT

Being strong in your personal decisions is something psychologists encourage in mums trying to avoid feelings of guilt. One example

of this is Carolyn Mogharbel (left), who experienced low milk supply and topped her daughter Salma, now two, up with formula for the first three months of her life. "While I didn't want to do this, I also refused to be ashamed or guilty. I had bloody good reasons for doing so, medical reasons being among them," Carolyn says. "One day a family friend commented on how much Salma was growing and my father responded with, 'Yes, it's all boob,' and I piped up with, 'No, it's not,' and explained why. I had been frustrated noticing the silence, shame and criticism that sometimes comes with the bottle. When I spoke to women I knew about my experiences, I was shocked to find that so many of them were also doing some top-up feeds and how they were so scared of saying so because of criticism and shame! So I then went on to tell just about everybody I knew that I was topping up, just to combat that stigma."

strongly encourage her to," says Honor, who recommends joining a support network such as the Australian Breastfeeding Association before your next baby is born to learn as much about breastfeeding as possible. "The more preparation the better and then you've also set up a support you're familiar with for the postnatal period."

Just as every mum and bub pair are different, each mum who encounters guilt has a unique reason for it, says Honor.

Often, though, the nature of guilt is anger towards yourself, so all the more reason to work hard to combat it. If this is you, "take time to reflect on what the guilt is about with someone empathetic," Honor says. Becoming a mother is a journey with so many rewarding stages and whether the milk you feed your baby with flows out of a breast or a bottle is but a small blip within the bigger picture of parenthood. Own your decisions. They're yours to make. ★



MENTAL CHECKLIST

If you're still facing guilty feelings when bottle-feeding your bub, try working through a few of psychologist Honor Newman's feel-good tips:

- 1 **Recognise that symbolically** the actions of cuddling a baby and staring lovingly into her eyes while bottle-feeding is providing the same psychological benefits as if you were breastfeeding.
- 2 **Remind yourself of all the good things** that you are doing as a mother. Keeping a short list on a wallet-sized card may be useful. It could include things such as taking time off work to care for bub, soothing her when

she's distressed, playing games with her and bottle-feeding her because you gave breastfeeding all you had and it just didn't work out, if this is the case.

- 3 **Let go.** Allow yourself to feel the sadness of the loss/absence of breastfeeding your baby so that you can accept it and move on.
- 4 **Be mindful.** Accept your own thoughts and feelings whatever they may be, as they arise, including guilt.
- 5 **Seek professional help.** If none of these things are helping it's a good idea to seek out a psychologist. There's no shame in finding help!

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends babies be exclusively breastfed until around six months of age and that breastfeeding is continued until 12 months of age and beyond, for as long as mum and child desire. While breastfeeding is the ideal way to nourish your baby, we recognise not all mums are able to do so. If you have any concerns about your breastfed or bottle-fed baby, make an appointment with your child health nurse or GP.