



January 24, 2011

# Staying Connected

## with Tina Millican

## Hey...what about me?

### A new mom's need for social interaction

Nancy, a 28 year old mother of a 4-month-old, called me last week desperately seeking support. Her voicemail was a little vague, but from experience I knew that she was feeling alone and a sense of isolation in her new role as a mom.

I called Nancy back. In the first two minutes my intuition was confirmed. Without a breath, Nancy burst out, "It's the same thing every day! I hardly ever get a shower in, my phone never rings, and I feel like I am so disconnected from the outside world. I know I need to get out," Nancy admitted, "but where do I go? Why don't my friends call me anymore?"

Two months prior to the delivery of Thomas, Nancy's husband, Brian, was relocated to a job that sent them 500 miles from family and friends. While not convenient in timing, both Nancy and Brian were excited about the move and change. What they didn't realize was how difficult it would be to build a new group of friends and a support network. Nancy was always home with the baby and Brian worked long hours at his new job. There was no time (or energy) for anything more.

For many new families, this could be their story. Nancy is not alone. This is real and it is very common for new moms to feel isolated. Around 2-4 months postpartum, moms often feel a desire to get out of the day-to-day routine and connect with someone their own age and with similar interests. One-way baby talk is only satisfying for so long, no matter how cute and cuddly that baby is!

### The science behind the need for social interaction

Social interaction, whether one-to-one, or in a group, is an important part of human nature. According to John Cacioppo, a neuroscientist at the University of Chicago and coauthor of, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, when all is said and done, the best guarantee of a long and healthy life may be the connections you have with other people.

Cacioppo adds, just like hunger and thirst and pain, loneliness signals something important for the survival of your genes—the need for connection to other individuals. In everyday life, play with the idea of trying to get small doses of the positive sensations that come from good social interactions. Just saying to someone, "Isn't it a beautiful day?" or "I loved that book!" can bring a friendly response that makes you feel better.

Human connections do not only enhance our lives, they're a biological imperative.

According to Maslow's hierarchy, after physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, the third layer of human needs is social and involves feelings of belonging. This aspect of Maslow's hierarchy involves emotionally based relationships in general, such as friendship, intimacy and family.

Humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, whether it comes from a large social group, such as clubs, office culture, religious groups, professional organizations, sports teams, or small social connections (family members, intimate partners, mentors, close colleagues, confidants). They need to love and be loved by others. In the absence of these elements, many people become susceptible to loneliness, social anxiety, and depression.

### **Typical reasons new parents feel isolated and disconnected from their pre-baby world**

While different for every family, some of the most common reasons new parents, moms especially, feel a sense of isolation and disconnect, result from the following:

1. Plain and simple, a new baby takes up a lot of your day. Finding a routine and balance takes time.
2. Friends aren't sure what new families want and are cautious about calling or stopping by. Be sure to communicate with your good friends what you need and that they are encouraged to call you (if that is what you want). Slowly bring them into your world. Most are assuming you are busy and are respecting your time.
3. Friendships change when a baby enters the picture. Previous common interest, can change when baby is born. New friendships will form, most really deep friendships will continue and others will fade away. Take your baby for walks, join a community play group, or strike up a conversation with another mom while at the park. In these environments, you may find many supportive and kind people who share similar interests.
4. A recent move or relocation has created a social void. When you are ready, join a local mother's group, parent association or special interest group that will introduce you to new people and get you out of the house.
5. Baby has a medical or health challenge that keeps you at home. This is when you and your spouse (or significant other) really need to work as a team. Take turns getting out of the house for a pre-determined period of time. Start with short amounts of time and work up.

### **Breaking free from isolation**

In most cases, this sudden feeling of isolation and disconnection means you are "ready" or "need" to reclaim yourself. It is time to bring you and the new role of motherhood together. Talking with Nancy, I was able to get her brainstorming some ideas that would help her feel more connected to the outside world.

The key is small baby steps (pun intended!). Start by asking yourself the following questions:

1. What activities did I enjoy doing most prior to becoming a mom?
2. What do I really need right now?
3. Does interacting with a group sound like something of interest or do I just need to get out of the house?
4. What do I need for the action I am seeking to take place (childcare, time with spouse/significant other, group support, information...)?
5. When can I realistically start the action listed above?

Adjusting to your new parenting role takes time. Many parents feel a strong sense of guilt as they try to balance the demands of a newborn and their own needs. Parents naturally want to be there for their child's every needs. Taking care of yourself however, actually has added benefit to the healthy interactions with your child. When you are meeting your own needs, you have the capacity to give to your child fully and free of resentment or stress.

*Special Note: 10-15% of women experience more significant symptoms of depression or anxiety during the first year postpartum. If your symptoms last more than two or three weeks, or get in the way of your day-to-day functioning, talk to a trained professional, your doctor or contact Postpartum Support International ([www.ppm-support.com](http://www.ppm-support.com)).*

***Seattle Area Connection Spots:***

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*Program for Early Parent Support, [www.pepsgroup.org](http://www.pepsgroup.org)  
Birth and Beyond, [www.birthandbeyond.com](http://www.birthandbeyond.com) (Seattle)  
Parent Support Program, Children's Hospital (Seattle)  
Orange Blossom Society, [www.orangeblossomsociety.com](http://www.orangeblossomsociety.com) (Redmond)  
Ashram Yoga, [www.theashramyoga.com](http://www.theashramyoga.com) (Kirkland/Redmond)  
Blossoming Yogis (Yoga for kids and adults), [www.blossomingyogis.com](http://www.blossomingyogis.com)  
Twirl Café, [www.twirlcafe.com](http://www.twirlcafe.com) (Seattle)  
Meetup.com (find specialty groups, mommy meetups, etc.)  
Bellevue Square Play Area (Third Floor)  
Woodinville Toddler Group (Cooperative Parent Education Program),  
[www.woodinvilletoddlergroup.com](http://www.woodinvilletoddlergroup.com)  
Local Community Colleges, Parent Education Programs  
Local Parks  
Local Parks and Recreation (Parent-child classes)  
Local Religious Organizations*

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**For More Information, Please Contact**

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