

the *fourth* trimester

a postpartum guide
to *healing* your body,
balancing your emotions
& *restoring* your vitality

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creating a postpartum sanctuary plan

Planning for birth is both daunting and exciting. Women, couples, and health-care professionals usually cooperate and carefully consider what they want out of the birth experience. But our society would be a different place if there were as much attention given to the post-birth transition as there is to the birth itself. I venture to say that fewer women would be depressed, more couples would survive the first year, and babies would be calmer.

Just as your birth plan allows you to think through and communicate your ideal birth, a postpartum sanctuary plan is an excellent way to anticipate and plan for the support you will need to have the smoothest sacred window possible. I recommend that you create your plan with your partner in your third trimester. But before I guide you in putting together your postpartum sanctuary plan, there are a few things I want you to know.

First of all, you are going to need a lot more help than you think you will need. We tend to think that if we *can* do something ourselves, then we *should*. This is absolutely *not* true postpartum. All of your energy needs to go toward healing your body and learning about your baby. Just as you are providing unlimited food for your baby, you need someone to be nourishing you. And as tempting as it is, relying on partners for this care isn't the optimal setup for success,

as they are going through their own journey into parenting.

Second, the purpose of receiving support at this time is not to help your baby—it is to help you. It is to support *you* in getting your basic needs of food, comfort, and unconditional love met, and also to support you in deepening your self-confidence and trusting in your instincts as a mother.

You will go through a range of emotions that you have never experienced, sometimes all in one day.

You will experience periods of doubt. You will need companionship that you can rely on, assuring you that everything is okay, that you will reemerge. You need someone who can reflect the richness of the process to you.

Having the support you need will allow you to immerse yourself in the experience as it is happening, so when it is time to surface, you will be completely intact. I have never heard a woman lament having too much postpartum support. I have only heard women regret that no one told them they should have invested more resources in postpartum care.

BUILDING YOUR POSTPARTUM SANCTUARY PLAN

Start with this question: What would it be like to set yourself up to have everything you need, and maybe even spoil yourself, during the sacred window? What would it be like to feel like a queen, to have your favorite healthy meals cooked and served to you, to have someone else doing the laundry and straightening up the house, to have a massage every week, physical therapy, and dreamy sleeps throughout the day with your best girlfriends and relatives around whenever you need them?

Pause for a moment. Close your eyes, and notice what that idea feels like in your body. Some women may experience a joyful, uplifting feeling. Others might feel discomfort because it seems indulgent or simply impossible to orchestrate. Yet others might feel dread at

the thought of so much interaction and what feels like an invasion of privacy. Someone may experience a bit of all of them. Pay attention to your inner reaction: it has wisdom for you. Although for most of us receiving this kind of help seems like a luxury, postpartum, it is a necessity.

The postpartum sanctuary plan (see appendices 1 and 2) guides you through inquiries and information gathering that ensures you have all of the information and resources collected ahead of time to meet the five universal postpartum needs of rest, nourishing food, loving touch, spiritual companionship, and contact with nature after your baby is born.

You will find the postpartum sanctuary plan in three parts in the appendix. Appendix 1 is for you to fill out on your own. Appendix 2A is for both you and your partner to fill out separately and then compare, so make two copies. Appendix 2B is for you and your partner to fill out together.

After you fill these out, put them in a place that is easy to see, so that you remember to use them! What follows is some deeper explanation of values and reasoning behind the sanctuary plan.

Creating a Sanctuary

After having a baby, you will want your home to feel like a refuge. You'll be spending a lot of time there, so it is important that it feels good to you and that the people and the energy they bring also feel good. Consider now: Who do you want to visit you in the first three days? In the first two weeks? In the first month? Discuss this with your partner so you are in agreement, and then he or she can honor your wishes.

Here are some things you may want to consider when thinking of who you want to visit and when.

Primed hormonally to protect your baby, you will be more sensitive than usual to energy and words. Things that wouldn't normally bother you may get under your skin. This sensitivity is actually

great news, it means that your mothering instincts are awake and that you know what you and your baby need at this time. Minimizing visitors is a good idea during the extended rest period. This may seem confusing in light of how much support you need. People who come to contribute are different from people who come to sit on the couch and admire your baby. Fortunately, with a little guidance, we can help people come into our home sanctuary in a way that will be helpful and supportive to us. I have included a sign, appendix 4, that you can put on your front door that will help with this.

Although there are the universal needs, support looks different for each woman. Contemplate the questions: What makes *you* feel supported and calm? Is it a straightened-up house? Is it a beautiful home-cooked meal? Is it a hug? A massage? Is it time to read a chapter of a book? Is it a bath drawn for you? A conversation with a friend?

When you know the answers, it is easier to ask for what you need.

A special note is required here for managing technology. Most of us are already well aware of the challenges of technology—the onslaught of text messages, e-mails, incoming calls, and the time suck and allure of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest. This is a great time to reflect on how you want technology to work for you. Many of us are accustomed to browsing Google or playing games on our phones or scrolling through messages when what we actually need is downtime. Screen time complicates sleep patterns and often doesn't give us the mental break that we are looking for. Decide now what the optimal relationship to your phone, computer, and social media would be for you postpartum.

Would you like to look at your phone three times a day, in the morning, midday, and in the evening? Would you like to check e-mails once a day? Whatever you choose, you can let the people you are communicating with know so they know what to expect from you. This is huge in protecting your undistracted bonding time with your baby, as well as facilitating your own ability to rest.

Research shows that having a cell phone in sight changes the tone and topic of conversations, affecting our willingness to go deep and to concentrate. Better to keep your phone out of reach or, better yet, out of the room that you are resting or sleeping in, so you can concentrate on your baby and both of you can sleep soundly. Also, you will then be choosing when you want to use your phone or iPad, rather than picking it up mindlessly out of habit.

New moms are often tempted to use the Internet to research questions and clarify doubts. As you know, it is easy to fall into the online pit, spending more time than intended or becoming completely overwhelmed by the amount of information to sift through. Now is a good time to return to the old-fashioned way of gathering information about mothering: Talk to trusted mothers, grandmothers, friends, and health-care providers. Be courageous and reach out. Don't be afraid to use the words: "I am _____ (confused, afraid, in pain). This is what's happening. What do you think?"

Nourishing Your Body

Making sure you are well fed is one of the priorities of this postpartum period, and a great way to build and lean on community at this time.

One of the easiest places to start is with a meal train. It's great when the organizer of your baby shower or mother blessing is willing to organize the meal train. A baby shower is a gathering where people offer gifts for the baby. (A mother blessing is a ritual that honors the passage of the pregnant woman into motherhood. At a mother blessing, women gather together to share stories and lessons about birth and motherhood, making a piece of art together and creating a ritual for the new mom to gather strength for birth and motherhood.) If you don't have anyone to organize the meal train, go ahead and begin one yourself. It's worth it! There are free apps and websites, so you don't have to do all the asking and scheduling: www.mealtrain.com, www.mealbaby.com, and www.takethemameal.com are just a few options.

Start by brainstorming who in your family, neighborhood, or community may be able to help you. Women are often pleasantly surprised at the people who participate whom they would not necessarily have considered part of their support system. If you want to minimize the number of new people coming in and out of the house, you can have a basket or cooler outside your front door where people leave the meals. If you have specific food needs, state them. It's also great to give examples of your favorite meals, so people know what you like. Appendix 3 is a letter template for meal-train participants that you can use or modify.

In addition to a meal train, which usually lasts four to six weeks, set yourself up for success for the whole fourth trimester and beyond. Make a sample grocery list of the foods you like. Again, I have included some examples in appendix 5. With a list, someone else can easily shop for you. Also gather takeout menus, information for delivery services, and a list of restaurants that deliver. There's no quicker way to a meltdown than being hungry and tired while nursing your baby.

Gathering Your Tribe

A meal train is a great way to mobilize friends and neighbors who want to help you after you have a baby. The postpartum period is an amazing time to gather the people who want to support you, and mobilizing a meal train is a great start. For many people, having a baby is the beginning of building their tribe. Babies bring people together like nothing else. This is a chance to build a community to start supporting you now, one that can accompany you on this journey. The bonds that you form with other young parents, who you may not have had much in common with before, can evolve into rich and rewarding connections now that you have common questions and needs arising through parenting. These new connections are often one of the most memorable and nourishing parts of this phase of life.

It's also a great time to assemble a wider tribe or network of care providers. Likely, you have already started this process, but there may be resources in appendix 1 that you haven't considered, like lactation support, postpartum doula services, or a night nurse. It's best to get these recommendations now, so there is one less step to go through when you feel stressed or overwhelmed. The best place to find these resources is your friend network. If you are new to an area or the first of your friends to have a baby, venues where there is lactation support, birth centers, or midwifery collectives often have extensive references and contacts for postpartum services.

Remembering What Brings You Joy

Now that you know your body will be nourished, how will your mind and spirit be nourished? When you feel a little off, what gets you back on track? Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Turning attention to your breath
- Singing
- Music
- Movement
- Reading inspirational words
- Watching great films
- Talking with a dear friend

Make a list of your own resources so you can visit it when things get rough. Be specific. If inspirational words soothe you, download podcasts or dharma talks so you have them readily accessible. Make a list of uplifting shows, films, or documentaries that you would like to watch. Have reading material available that is not on your phone or computer so that you are not dependent on, and then possibly distracted by, other features of your technology.

These small course corrections can make a big difference. When you start to get overwhelmed, you can pause, visit your list, and figure out which way sounds best to get the connection you need at

that time. Place your list on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror, someplace that will remind you to check in and take a small action.

Safeguarding Your Relationship Postpartum

It's no secret that having a baby can create waves in relationships. Even when things go smoothly, a new baby brings an element of unpredictability that is a stressor on every couple. While becoming parents affects us in ways we could never imagine, there are some universal obstacles that we face. Dr. John Gottman, a seminal researcher on parenting and relationships, found that on average there is a 67 percent decline in marital satisfaction in the first three years after having a baby.

Community Stories:

Joanie

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Joanie came to see me for a birth rehearsal, a process that I take pregnant women through in their last couple of weeks before birth so that they feel some of the sensations they will experience during birth ahead of time, as well as have access to pushing muscles before actually having to use them. The moment she stepped into my office, she was bereft. Her face was bright red and she was shaking, on the verge of tears. She felt pressured by both her mother and her mother-in-law to have them present at the birth and after. Even though she had moved thousands of miles away from both of them to avoid their interference, she felt guilty and confused about what to do. She felt consumed by their desires and unsure of what her responsibility was. She was absolutely sure that she wanted her birth experience to be between her, her baby, and her husband. She didn't want to have to fight to do things her way, but she was starting to realize that if she continued to be nice

and agreeable, she would not have the experience she wanted.

The first session we worked through these old feelings of having to take care of other people. Her deep intuition was rearing up, encouraging her to unplug this legacy of caretaking from her own mother and mother-in-law, so she could redirect it to her baby and her new family. Like many women, she had a detailed birth plan and was preparing her body, mind, and spirit to have the birth she wanted. But when I asked about who would take care of her after the baby was born, if she didn't want her mother and mother-in-law there, Joanie drew a blank. She hadn't given it much thought, but imagined she would just figure it out with her husband. When I suggested to her that she would need to be nurtured and mothered as she became a mother, she cringed. She said that she hated the word *mothering* and had always been able to do everything herself.

I wish I could say that Joanie was the exception in thinking that her self-sufficiency, willpower, and resourcefulness would carry her through the postpartum period, but I hear this all the time. Together we talked about the five universal needs of postpartum women, and we came up with a plan of how she and her husband could be supported so she felt protected and safe while going through the uncertainty of learning about her new baby. We agreed that if she didn't receive any nurturing she might become even more resentful toward her own mother for not being able to give her that support. Instead, Joanie decided that a postpartum doula who would deliver nourishing food, walk her dog, and talk when she wanted to would be the most helpful. She wrote to me later to tell me that it was the best decision she ever made. She couldn't fathom the idea of having another baby without having this wise postpartum doula to support her.

The good news is that the research showed that, by addressing these obstacles ahead of time, it was possible to lower relationship distress as well as postpartum depression. Anticipating some potential roadblocks in your relationship goes a long way toward easing the transition to parenthood and even saving relationships. Specifically, Gottman's research found that all it took to mitigate the stress of the baby's first year on a marriage was two forty-minute counseling sessions before pregnancy to troubleshoot potential disagreements and prepare for what was to come. In appendix 2A, there are questions to use as starting points for these conversations, in case you don't make it to counseling. What follows are a context for those conversations and a few other suggestions for ways to deepen your relationship.

How to Approach Your Partner

While counseling sessions can be effective, you can also do some work on your own. The two of you are in this together, and there is no one in the world more invested in how you are doing than your partner. When you understand and acknowledge how interconnected your well-being is with your partner's well-being, it becomes obvious that what you are doing to your partner is what you are doing to yourself. In this way, your partner and your relationship can be your biggest allies and biggest untapped resources. Rather than just another thing that's demanding your energy, your relationship can become the power source for all the other areas of your life, the place you come back to in order to recharge and gain strength. This renewed understanding begins with unconditional positive regard, giving your partner the benefit of the doubt and acting with friendliness and kindness toward him or her. Stan Tatkin, the relationship expert and author of *Wired for Love*, says that, as couples, we need to form a relationship bubble. Inside that bubble are all the qualities that we stand for in our relationship, as well as what is sacred and private to us, and we need to protect this bubble.

A couple is made up of two individual people. The relationship is a third entity that has its own qualities and its own purpose. You may already have a strong sense of what your purpose is as a couple and for one another or you may still be discovering it. Perhaps having a child is part of your relationship's purpose. Reflecting on the beautiful qualities of your unique bubble will help the two of you to feel connected now, and give you something to refer back to.

THE COUPLE BUBBLE

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1. Sit down together, each with a journal or piece of paper and pen. Set a timer for ten minutes and free-associate completing the following statements:
 - What I bring to us is . . .
 - What you bring to us is . . .
 - What we bring to the world, and what we have for each other is . . .
 - What we already are is . . .
 - Our compass or guiding principle is . . .
 - What I am committed to for me is . . .
 - What I am committed to for you is . . .
 - The wounds that I am healing include . . .
 - The wounds that you are healing include . . .
 - Our dreams are . . .
2. After ten minutes, share your answers with each other.
3. Take another sheet of paper and draw a Venn diagram—two circles that overlap in the middle. Make sure there is a big overlap in the middle. Label one circle with your name, the other with your partner's name. Label the middle "Us."
4. Fill in the circles together, choosing from the reflections you shared with each other. Create a visual representation that reminds you of what you are to each other and what the qualities and compass of your relationship are.

If you have made a formal commitment to each other, you may even want to revisit your vows or promises to one another and actually state them aloud. After all, the whole purpose of this exercise is to be very clear about your conviction to stay connected as a couple, as two become three.

VOWS

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- Create a sacred space, go out into nature, or go to your favorite romantic restaurant. (Choose something that is in alignment with your relationship and connection.)
- If you have vows or promises that are important to you, bring them with you and say them aloud to each other.
- If you don't have any formal vows, reflect on these questions and share your answers with each other:
 - What are three things that I appreciate about you as a partner?
 - What do I commit to in our relationship after we become parents?
- Record your answers in a simple way, either making a voice recording or writing them down.

To fully show up in the relationship, to the “us,” each of you has personal needs that must be met first. You reflected on your personal needs in the exercise above, now share those insights with your partner. Then ask your partner to reflect on his or her basic needs.

If your partner needs alone time, instead of both of you assuming that he can never have it again, brainstorm about how you might build that into a weekly routine. Would he rather have an hour every day or a half-day on the weekend? Does he need time to take a shower and sit down when he comes home from work in order to make the transition to home, or does he want to jump right in? Who could step in to be a primary support while he is gone? If an important part of your relationship has been the sexual connection,

together think through how you will maintain intimate contact without penetration.

You probably already have a good idea of how your partner handles stress, but it is worthwhile to talk together about what your tendencies are when you are stressed. Here are some questions you should both answer about how you react to stress:

Do you withdraw?

Do you leave?

Do you talk a lot?

Do you get irritable?

When you notice how you are feeling, what is helpful for you?

What can your partner do to help you to get back on track?

What are you scared of?

What are the things that worry you about your relationship and how it will change as parents?

Are you afraid to lose a physically intimate connection?

Are you afraid of disappointing your partner?

Is it hard for you to be perceived as dependent or needy?

Are you afraid that you will become less important to your partner?

These questions, just like the personal needs you discussed before, will be used to help fill out your postpartum sanctuary plan.

If you have never explored the five love languages, finding out the way that your partner best receives support can be a revelation. The way that we show our love is not always the way our partner best receives it. It's our job to deliver the love, care, and compassion that can be received by our partner. You can take a test to see for yourself what your love language is at this website: www.5lovelanguages.com.

The five ways that we exchange appreciation are: touch, acts of service, words of affirmation, gifts, and quality time. You may already have an inkling which one of those lights you up the most, and which one your partner is most drawn to, but it's worth it to

confirm your hunch. Remember that connecting through your love language is a way to express appreciation and communicate anything that may not be working for you.

There's a lot of research out there showing how stressful having a baby is on a relationship. If you listen to most people talking about it, it sounds like you are never going to have sex or an uninterrupted conversation again. But the good news is that there is also a lot of research showing that simple troubleshooting goes a long way toward strengthening your relationship long-term. Having a baby has the potential to bring you closer together rather than driving you further apart.

Ways to Stay Connected after Baby

Be learners together. Remember there is no right way to be a parent.

Express appreciation often.

Make time for honest conversations.

Remember your partner's love language and do the little things.

Allow your partner to find his or her own way with the baby.

Greet each other in comings and goings, when leaving the house and arriving.

Connect before sleep and upon waking, with eye contact or a verbal greeting.

Dedicate three to five minutes a day for loving connection, whether that is gazing into each other's eyes, light touch, or talking.

SUMMARY: PREPARING FOR YOUR POSTPARTUM SANCTUARY PLAN

- A postpartum sanctuary plan is just as important as a birth plan in setting yourself up for success in the fourth trimester.
- Plan to need a lot of help and be creative about where you might get it. Build your tribe.
- Assemble your network of health care providers and therapists now so that it is there if and when you need it.
- Many relationships suffer after having children, but if you make the health of your relationship a priority, your partnership can thrive.

Practices

- Makes copies of the postpartum sanctuary plans, appendices 1 and 2. Discuss them with your partner. Fill them out and stick them somewhere where you will see them and use them.
- Gather takeout menus, information for delivery services, and a list of restaurants that deliver, assembling the information that you need.
- Discover the unique qualities of your couple bubble.
- Review your vows and promises to one another, or create some.
- Find out what your love language is as well as that of your partner. Taking into account your partner's love language, do something to surprise him or her.

Reflections

- How can you start to build the sanctuary you want to heal in?
- Who is in your life that you can turn to for specific things, and what sources do you still need to track down?
- What do you appreciate most about your partner and your partnership?
- What agreements would you like to make with your partner?
- What is one thing that you could start doing now that you would like to continue after your baby is born?

Appendix 1:
POSTPARTUM SANCTUARY PLAN

The postpartum time is a period of great change on every level—physical, mental, emotional, sexual, and spiritual. This postpartum plan will help you to build a foundation so that you can attend to the five universal postpartum needs: rest, nourishing food, loving touch, companionship, and contact with nature.

VISITORS

Who do you want to visit in the first three days?

In the first two weeks?

In the first month?

REST

What do you anticipate might be obstacles to resting for you?

What are ways that you can address those?

How will you create the space to nap during the day?

How will you manage visitors to ensure space for resting? (See Sign for Your Front Door in appendix 4 for ideas.)

How will you manage technology (devices, mobile phone, computers)?
When will you unplug?

FOOD

List three of your favorite and most nourishing meals. (You can also see recipes in appendix 6 for ideas.)

List three balanced snacks that you love.

Who can organize the meal train?

Include dietary needs and restrictions for your family for the meal train.

Assemble takeout menus. Which restaurants deliver?

COMPANIONSHIP

Gather Your Tribe

Think about your tribe, the people who you know are there for you, and that you can trust for emotional support or to lend a helping hand. Fill in names and phone numbers to make it one step easier when the time comes and you need them!

Who can you call to tell how you are really feeling about mothering and who will listen without judgment or advice?

Who could you call if you want to take a shower and need someone to hold your baby?

Who would you trust to take your baby for a walk?

Who can you talk to about the hard mothering decisions that you feel would be safe and would not judge you?

Who do you know who makes wholesome and nutritious food?

Who could you call if you want someone to sit with you and hang out?

Who do you know whose mothering you respect?

Who would you like weekly visits from?

Who is knowledgeable about local contacts for health care?

Your Wider Tribe of Wellness Support

Now think about your wider tribe—the people that you can assemble to provide you with self-care expertise, wellness information, and expert care, when needed. Put this list on the refrigerator so that when you need the resource it is easy to find.

Somatic therapist

Holistic pelvic care/scar-tissue remediation specialist

Lactation consultant

Chiropractor

Massage therapist

Acupuncturist

Ob-gyn

Midwife

Housekeeper

Postpartum doula

Night nurse

Local breastfeeding support group

Local playgroups

Mommy and me exercise groups

about the author



Kimberly Johnson is a birth doula, Sexological Bodyworker, Somatic Experiencing practitioner, postpartum care advocate, and single mom. Kimberly is the cofounder of the STREAM School for Postpartum Care, where she trains birth professionals, bodyworkers, and somatic therapists to help women with prolapse, incontinence, painful sex, and other pelvic-floor and gynecological issues.

Kimberly graduated valedictorian in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. A longtime yoga teacher, yoga teacher trainer, and Structural Integration practitioner, she was unexpectedly rearranged in body, mind, and spirit when she sustained an injury during childbirth. Determined not to get full pelvic-floor reconstructive surgery, she traveled the world learning about postpartum practices, healed herself holistically, and now helps other women do the same.

She has private practices in Encinitas and Los Angeles, CA, specializing in helping women prepare for birth, recover from birth injuries and birth trauma, and access their full sexual expression. Her most outstanding accomplishment is being a single mom to her fiery nine-year-old half-Brazilian daughter, Cecilia.

You can find her online at www.magamama.com.