



Addressing the Mental Load for Caregivers



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Parenting can be fun and rewarding. It often brings moments of joy for parents and caregivers as they attend birthday parties, sporting events, and create memories with their kids. However, there is a great deal of behind-the-scenes work needed to achieve such fun. This is often called mental load, invisible load, or cognitive load. This is defined as both work that is seen, such as laundry, dishes, or driving the kids to practice as well as unseen, such as worrying about their children's wellbeing or grades. Finally, we can't forget about all the planning that takes place to make all the activities successful, like making sure jerseys are clean for baseball or scheduling playdates and birthday parties.

Additionally, there is a whole other aspect of parenting that does not get as much recognition and can arguably have a greater impact on mental fatigue. This aspect consists of the countless hours parents spend researching to ensure they are providing the best possible support for their children. Examples of this are reading books on sleep training, researching how to manage tantrums or a picky eater, or how to help with homework.

While it may be challenging to decrease the amount of physical and mental energy required to be a parent, we can make some adjustments to lessen the negative impact this mental load has on us.



Here are helpful strategies for support:

Be expressive about the mental load

Your partner may not know the extent of the additional weight you are carrying, so it is important to have a conversation about it. Using “I” statements can help convey where you need help and reduce the chances of the other partner feeling defensive. If you are a single parent or caregiver, it may be helpful to be communicative about your mental load with family and friends and ask for help.

Be realistic about the “must do” versus “nice to have”

Partners often don't have the same viewpoint on the mental load. This usually stems from what each person values as important. For example, one partner may think it's important for the children to participate in every school dress up day whereas the other partner doesn't see it as a priority. You may need to prioritize and focus on the “big ticket” items if your aim is to share the mental load. If you are a single parent or caregiver, be mindful of your own bandwidth, you may need to prioritize based on what you are able to do vs. what you want to do.



Create routines and a schedule

There are quite a few benefits to creating a consistent routine for the family. When things are predictable, it helps with task delegation and sets everyone up for realistic expectations. Consider making this visual with a family calendar or a shared calendar on a mobile application.

Simplify clutter

Making environmental changes can have a significant impact on mental fatigue. Consider starting with one area at a time to organize and declutter. Simplifying clutter will help naturally find a place for everything. This can greatly reduce mental load because you and your children will be able to locate items more easily.

Weekly meeting

Consider having a weekly meeting to look ahead. During this meeting, discuss weekly duties both visible (e.g., doing the dishes) and invisible (e.g., remember class picture day). Use this time to practice active listening and effective communication for what went well and what could have been better during the previous week.

Delegate

There are both visible and invisible tasks that need to be done in a short amount of time, every day. Sometimes, this can fall on just one caregiver which can lead to resentment, conflict, and increased stress. Practice in-the-moment delegation. For example, both kids still need to take a bath, dishes need to be done, and homework is not complete. Take a moment to list the remaining tasks together and distribute them so the load does not silently fall on one person. If you are a single parent or caregiver, think about how to best prioritize those activities and those in which your children can help.



Praise your partner

It may feel unnatural or unnecessary to praise your partner's efforts but doing so helps you focus on the tasks your partner is doing and increases feelings of validation among partners. This can also encourage your partner to continue supporting with the mental load of the home.

Be okay with an unequal distribution

It will not always be 50/50. Consistently striving for a 50/50 distribution may be unrealistic. Take the time to think about what distribution feels reasonable and aim for that. This may evolve over time as jobs change, children move out of the home, etc.

Automate what you can

Take a moment and think about what takes up mental energy that can also be automated. Some examples could be grocery delivery with a repeating shopping list of typical items, monthly cleaning services, or reminder applications set on repeat for recurring events. This can be especially useful if you are a single parent or caregiver.

Practice self-care

A common analogy used when referring to parenting self-care is you cannot pour from an empty cup. Create time for intentional self-care and support one another for sticking to it. Feeling better can give you more energy and capacity to tackle the mental load.

Get the kids involved

Help children learn that their contribution matters too, so don't forget to delegate. Not only does this ease up the load on the parents but it teaches children valuable life lessons they will take with them after they leave the house.

Reach out to support

Being a parent is one of the hardest jobs. It takes a toll both mentally and physically, which is why we often hear the phrase, "it takes a village." Do not hesitate to reach out for both internal (e.g., family and friends) and external (e.g., marriage and family counseling) for support.

Additional Resources:

[Self-Care Webinar](#) - Hosted by RethinkCare

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/44071899-fair-play>

<https://chaosandquiet.com/the-invisible-mental-load-and-how-to-reduce-it/>

To sign up for a 1:1 consultation with a behavior expert – [schedule here!](#)