

INSIGHTS

Managing the mother load



“The mental load means always having to remember.”

Emma, a French cartoonist summed up the mental load that most mothers carry in her 2017 viral comic, ‘You should’ve asked’. In the opening scene a very hassled mother was preparing for a dinner party, while feeding her two young children, dealing with a noisy dog and answering the phone, all while she was hosting a colleague for dinner. As the dinner boils over the stove and onto the floor she looked at her partner imploringly. He unwittingly answered, *“But you should’ve asked! I would have helped.”*

This scene artfully exemplifies the many invisible layers of responsibility that mothers carry including arranging most household tasks, managing the family home and being on top of the fine detail in every family member’s life.

This is not the case in all families, but current research reveals that the great majority of women bear the load when it comes to housework (mums do twice as much as dads), caring for children (again, mums doing twice as much as dads) and carrying the mental load for their family.

There’s only so much we can manage. For those of us who are anxious, there will be times our plates will fill, and overflow. While there’s no single way to ease the mental load that mothers carry the following ideas will help to make life more manageable:

Stop making life easy for others

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many mums will overdo preparation rather than expect others to step up and help. I have been known in the past to cook and freeze up to a week’s worth of meals prior to travelling for work. Not any more though. Magically, my husband and two school-aged children have become very capable in the kitchen as I’ve stepped back.

Delegate and let go

Delegate some household jobs to your children. Leah Ruppanner, professor of sociology at Melbourne University says, “Unless death is impending from poor domestic decisions, step back, support and allow others to learn from their mistakes.” Letting go of jobs and allowing kids to do things in their own way is hard for perfectionist personality types, but it’s essential if you are going to last the parenting journey. Surprisingly, both guilt and perfectionism ensure that many mums keep their children dependent upon them.

Diarise and check

One way to ease the mental load is to lessen the number of mental notes and details that you carry around. Set up recurring electronic calendar entries for routine tasks and check regularly. This way you have less to remember and a place to find what you need, which is more efficient and mum-friendly way of being organised.

Lower the bar

Many mothers confess that they constantly feel guilt, if they don't put their children first. That's a heavy burden to carry. If anxiety is a constant companion, it's essential to lower the bar on your self-expectations. Unfulfilled expectations are proven stressors for mothers so take away tasks, rather than add to your mother load.

In closing

There's little doubt that many mothers carry an overwhelming mental load that adds to their anxiety and stress. I'm not suggesting that you abandon your job entirely but rather to look for ways to make the mental load you carry a little lighter. In doing so, life will become easier to manage. As with all behavioural change its easiest to start small. But whatever you do, if you're straining under the mother load make a start at releasing and sharing the load.

Parents can learn more about minimising anxiety as a mum in Dr. Jodi Richardson's book *Anxious Mums: How mums can turn their anxiety into strength* published by Penguin Random House.



Dr Jodi Richardson

Dr Jodi Richardson helps people to reduce their anxiety, strengthen their wellbeing, live by their personal values and achieve resilience and lasting happiness. Her research-based advice is grounded in a career of extensive university studies, clinical practice, education and endless compassion. Jodi is the co-author of the highly acclaimed book *Anxious Kids*. Her latest release is *Anxious Mums: How mums can turn their anxiety into strength*. For further details visit www.drjodirichardson.com.au