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The Mental Load Starts Long Before You're Ever a Parent

The cognitive and emotional labor that goes into raising kids and running a household originates and evolves over the course of the parenting journey, according to experts.

By [Maressa Brown](#) | Published on September 4, 2020

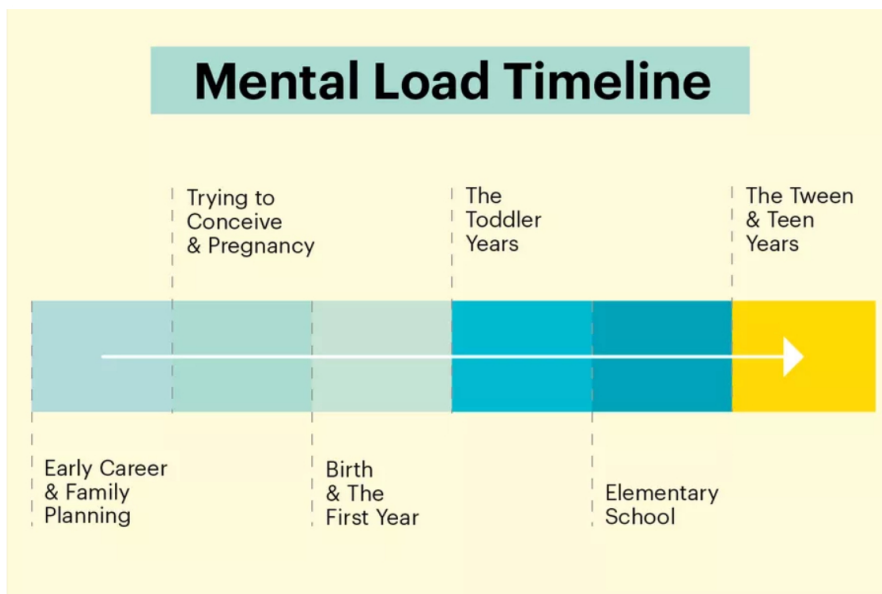


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The phrase "mental load" might bring to mind a bevy of images—meal prep for fussy toddlers, piles of dishes, shopping for school supplies, scheduling pediatrician appointments. While these examples might make it seem as though the mental load only begins to rear its ugly head once parents are several years into raising kids, it's actually a weight that is felt much earlier than people might expect.

"The mental load is the cognitive and emotional burden that goes into running a household and taking care of a family," explains Pooja Lakshmin, M.D., a clinical assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the George Washington

University School of Medicine. "It's the invisible labor of knowing what needs to be done, what has already been done, and what's being done right now. This load overwhelmingly falls on women." In short, the mental load is the weight of decision-making, says Dr. Lakshmin. "And it begins from the moment you decide you want to have a baby," she notes.

Here, Dr. Lakshmin and other experts explain what the mental load looks like from the start and how it evolves throughout the parenting journey.

Early Career vs. Family Planning

Well before a couple discusses trying to conceive, women are strapped with the cognitive labor of not only finding a partner with whom to start a family, but identifying and navigating a career path that will be compatible with eventual parenthood. Alyssa Westring, Ph.D., author of *Parents Who Lead: The Leadership Approach You Need to Parent with Purpose, Fuel Your Career, and Create a Richer Life* and a professor and researcher who has taught thousands of undergraduate students, says the mental load of career and family considerations starts earlier and weighs more heavily on women.

"Perhaps even before they make decisions about child-bearing, they are considering which careers might facilitate working parenthood," says Dr. Westring. "Female students are much more likely to ask me questions about work and parenting and to be conscious of the ways in which the timing of pregnancy/childbirth may affect their careers."

She points out that most research on gender differences in fertility intentions (i.e., planning to have children) ignores men's intentions and very little research looks at the decisions by which couples reach fertility decisions together.

This should come as no surprise, given gendered socialization, says Eve Rodsky, author of *Fair Play: A Game-Changing Solution for When You Have Too Much to Do (and More Life to Live)*. "The gendered notion of women taking care of babies and housework starts in childhood when girls begin shouldering 50 percent more of the housework than boys," says Rodsky.

Trying to Conceive and Pregnancy

Before you even begin to try to conceive, the mental load begins to fall to most women, says Evelyn Hunter, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist and assistant professor at Auburn University. "We really put the onus on

women to prevent and/or plan for pregnancy, in terms of birth control," says Dr. Hunter.

And once a couple begins to try to conceive, the woman bears the brunt of scheduling and going to OB-GYN appointments, tracking her cycle, monitoring her diet, or, in the case of infertility issues, taking on additional responsibilities like giving herself injections and getting labs done. "For those actively working to conceive, even the concept of 'pre-pregnancy' implies the woman is doing more pre-emptive work in order to ready her body for a fetus," adds Desirée N. Robinson, LCSW-C, ACS, a psychotherapist in Catonsville, Maryland.

Dr. Hunter points out that we tend to focus on a woman's physical health in pregnancy. "That then allows us to ignore relational, emotional pieces where a male partner would be more involved," she notes. "And so, the communication from the beginning of a pregnancy is that this is a woman's burden. This is a woman's responsibility. A male partner can show up to the OB checks or not."

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In fact, the onus society puts on women when they're expecting is so prevalent that even OB-GYNs might fail to see a male partner's role in the process. Dr. Hunter recalls how a client had dealt with nearly five years of infertility issues, and it wasn't until four years in that an OB even asked about her husband's sperm count. "It had not occurred to anybody that perhaps the fertility issues were not hers, and they weren't," she notes. "And so they got his sperm counts up, and she was pregnant in the next year."

Addie Vickrey, a mom of two from Berwyn, Pennsylvania, felt the weight of the mental load while trying to conceive and feels the experience set a precedent of imbalance. "My husband is a caring person, but when you are the human who bears responsibility for getting pregnant, staying pregnant, and maintaining mental and physical health during pregnancy, it can get exhausting," she says. "I think those experiences naturally make women more conditioned to take on a greater role in child-rearing. This was and has certainly been the case for us."

This mental load has only been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Given restrictions about whether partners may accompany pregnant spouses into doctor's offices—and even into hospitals for the actual childbirth—the pandemic significantly increases the likelihood that partners will not be present," says Dr. Westring. "As a result, they may feel less engaged in the process—and thus, less inclined to provide support (e.g., preparing for appointments, identifying questions for the doctor). This could establish a precedent

...making questions for the doctor, the usual obstetric procedure that extends even after childbirth, for postnatal appointments and early pediatrician appointments as well."

Birth and The First Year

Many women trace carrying a heavier mental load to the birth of their first child. "I believe women are forced to take the majority of the load the minute the baby is born," says Catherine Graves, a mom of two from Los Angeles, who points out that moms are often the parent taking some form of parental leave—be it paid or unpaid—while dads head back to work within a matter of days. "I don't want to discount how helpful my husband has been, but after he went back to work, I was doing everything for the kids. By the time he would get home, the baby would be awake for about an hour before we had to put him to bed."

We can attribute this role divide in the first few months of parenting to the lack of universal paid family leave for couples and limited paternity leave in the U.S. Rodsky says who takes parental leave and for how long makes a real difference for couples. "In my surveys, the men who took extended paternity leave during the first three to six months had a better understanding of the conception and planning, of that cognitive labor and mental load," she says. Rodsky found they were stepping up and remembering tasks like checking that the diaper bag was fully supplied and waking up to handle middle of the night feedings.

Dr. Westring explains that this is the result of men seeing firsthand the visible and the invisible work of child care. "One of the benefits of men taking paternity leave is that they are able to be home to see the physical, emotional, and mental work of parenting," she says. "If you don't see it, then it is a lot harder to see the types of things you can do to help."

Yet, while the dads who took extended paternity leave were doing well on child care, even they were falling short on housework. That echoes previous research Rodsky points to, published in *the Journal of Marriage and Family*, which found that when the babies were 9 months old, after whatever parental leave either parent took, both parents felt they were spending *a lot* of time on child care—nearly 22 hours for women, 14 for men—but women continued to do about 15 hours a week of housework, while men did four *fewer* hours.

The Toddler Years

Toddlers who are constantly exploring and asserting their independence are a handful for all parents, and one benefit is that much of the parenting work at this stage is noticeable. "It's clear that somebody is doing the potty-training or one person has their eye on the kid at all times," says Dr. Westring.

That's not to say that moms aren't carrying the mental load—which, at this point, might look like researching which potty-training books to buy by checking reviews and talking to friends, placing the order, reading them, not to mention continuing to buy the right size diapers and managing the everyday tasks that must be done to keep the household running, etc. "But, in some sense, during the toddler years, it might be easier to divide up the work because the work is visible," says Dr. Westring.

This might also be a time during which kids grow even more attached to their mom, especially if she has been carrying the mental load up to this point, says Robinson. "This is natural if the mother is seen as the primary caregiver—the one who feeds, bathes, clothes, talks, entertains, soothes, and tunes into a baby's needs," she says, noting that when toddlers come around to dad, the focus might be on playtime versus the everyday to-dos that fall to their mom.

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Elementary School

For moms of school-aged children, the mental load translates to nonstop to-dos and responsibilities. "Young children have full schedules with activities, friends, school, and family time," says Robinson. "Someone has to be on top of this, and the mental load grows with each additional child."

Vickrey can relate from her experience raising two kids. "I have always scheduled and attended every single checkup, vaccination, and school meeting with teachers," she says. "I buy their clothes, school supplies, and birthday and Christmas presents. I schedule all their playdates and activities. I worry about their school curriculum and mental health. I've been the parent pushing for occupational therapy and speech intervention for my youngest."

And as kids get involved in after-school social activities and extracurriculars, fathers might step up to take the reins on shuttling a child to their soccer practice or speech team tournament. But moms note that there are often many tasks that continue to fall to them.

"Seth, my husband, genuinely thought he was in charge of sports for our kids," says Rodsky. "In charge" translated to taking them to their games—full stop. In other words, he wasn't wrapping his head around the cognitive labor behind the execution of every task.

"We sat down, and I said, 'Here are the 19 things that get you to the little league field,'" she notes, sharing that she then highlighted tasks like surveying the kids on what they wanted to play, coordinating car pools, being the snack parent, organizing the coach's gift, ordering their supplies or asking friends for hand-me-downs, returning them when they're wrong, et al. "That's when my husband realized being 'in charge of sports' meant taking over the conception and planning of it," says Rodsky. "He had the motivation to own it, and I got six hours of my week back."

Social attitudes only serve to compound the issue. For instance, schools often lean on moms, expecting them to be the main point of contact for any issues that arise even if Dad's name is also on the contact form, notes Dr. Hunter. In fact, she herself was met with 12 missed calls from daycare when her daughter fell ill. They told Dr. Hunter they didn't even think to call her husband.

The Tween and Teen Years

As kids approach adolescence and acquire more independence, it's moms who are overwhelmingly bearing the brunt of cognitive labor around issues like screen time, discipline, and kids' social lives, in addition to added academic pressures, says Rodsky.

Plus, in addition to carrying the mental load not shared with their partner, moms of tweens and teens might be contending with mental load that could otherwise be handled by the kids themselves. Tweens and teens can be taught to understand the mental load and the need to complete a task from start to finish, says Rodsky. "My kids are in charge of actual, full start-to-finish tasks in our house," she says, explaining that her eldest does laundry and her middle child does the dishes every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Still, even when they're pitching in with chores, parents say that raising teens is incredibly emotionally and cognitively draining, notes Dr. Westring. "There's more frustration than with younger children," she says. "If I want to order a toddler's clothes, I just pick, but if you want to order clothes for a teen, there's more of a negotiation. And teens might have social challenges, mental health issues, stress or anxiety from schoolwork you want to support, and that translates to a lot of mental load, which is less noticeable than maybe organizing a playdate for a 2-

year-old."

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The Cumulative Effect

If the weight of the mental load at every stage of the parenting game wasn't heavy enough, it bears noting that it's heightened for Black moms, for moms in communities of color, moms in poverty, and single moms across the timeline, points out Dr. Hunter.

In the end, whether moms are carrying the weight of children's academics, health care, or housework, men's inability to "see" the imbalances throughout the parenting journey boils down to privilege. "When it comes to mental load, men have the privilege of not carrying it," says Dr. Hunter. "Each individual thing feels like a really little thing. But it translates to death by 1,000 bee stings."

Still, at every step along the timeline, there are ways to shift the balance. "While it's not our fault that things play out this way—the mental load is a systemic, structural issue—learning to set boundaries and saying 'no' is an important piece of dealing with the mental load," says Dr. Lakshmin. "You have to be OK with disappointing other people. No one else is going to give you permission to let go of the mental load. You have to give it to yourself."

Read more of Parents.com's special report on the mental load of parenthood [here](#).

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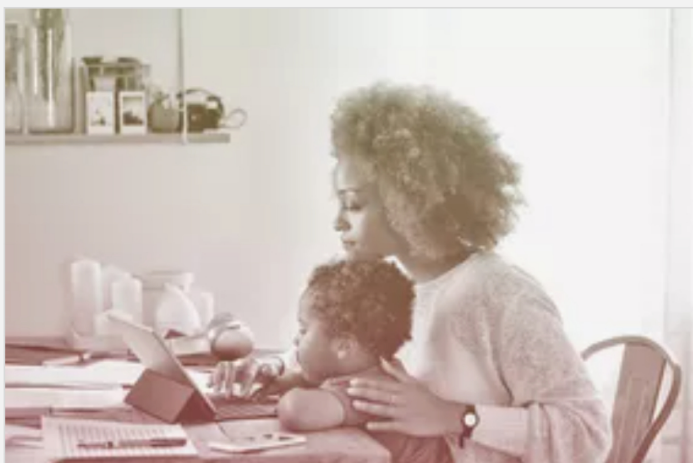
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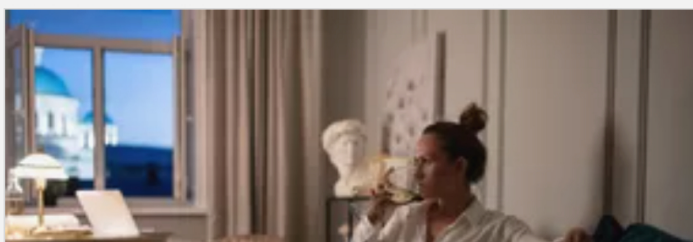
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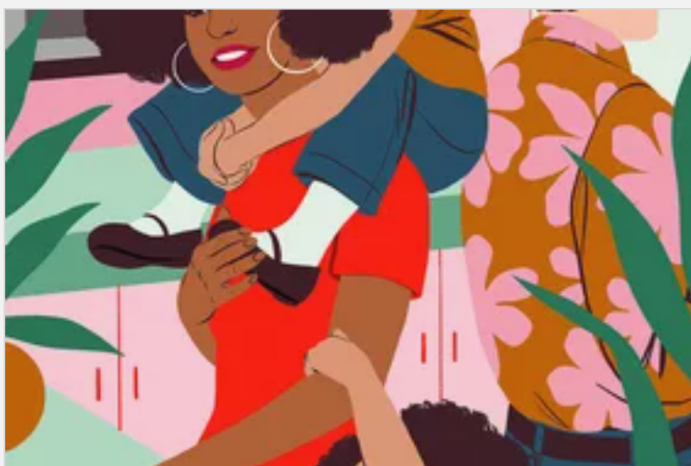
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