

The Mental Load

In many households, women take on a disproportionate share of the invisible labor that keeps everything running smoothly. We explore how four Sacramento couples are dividing tasks in a world complicated by gender roles, work demands and endless to-do lists.

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There is a ceaseless mental hum that is familiar to anyone who does the lion's share of running a household, especially one with children. It's a relentless internal monologue—sometimes calm, sometimes panicked—that goes something like this:

We're almost out of toilet paper. Hope my client meeting winds down early enough that I can stop by Target before I pick up the kids. Buy poster board for Sophia's project while you're there. And glue sticks. We need a new dentist. Ask friends for referrals. Get Aunt Patti's birthday card in the mail. Coordinate with Michael's friends so that he'll know someone at basketball camp. Check if Sophia's swimsuit still fits her. Did I remember to RSVP to Marcos' party? Find someone to give Sophia a ride home while I take Michael to practice on Friday. Crap. I forgot to call the plumber about the garbage disposal. Figure out how to handle that car insurance problem. Ask Dan if we still have that old hat in the garage for Michael's costume. I hope there's some broccoli in the fridge. I forgot to tell Erika that I can't drive car pool next Wednesday because of work. Gotta text her ASAP. But first, buy the toilet paper.

This behind-the-scenes domestic labor—the list making, researching, scheduling, organizing and delegating—is what’s known as the mental load, and it keeps the proverbial trains running on time. It can also be the source of tremendous conflict among some couples, especially when the tasks fall disproportionately to one person. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, 56 percent of married adults believe that shared housework is key to a successful marriage, just behind having common interests and a satisfying sex life. Yet a separate Pew study from 2015 shows there is a gender gap when it comes to how mothers and fathers describe the distribution of labor in their households, with mothers more likely to report that they do more when it comes to tasks like managing children’s schedules and handling everyday chores.

“You Should’ve Asked,” an online comic by French cartoonist Emma that went viral in 2017, spelled out with biting humor how the so-called chore wars are less about who does the dishes (although that’s still an issue) and more about who remembered to put Cascade on the shopping list or that plastic lids can’t go on the bottom rack. The mental load, by its very nature, isn’t simply about the discrete household tasks—say vacuuming, or taking out the trash—that are relatively easy to divide. It’s about the unseen but time-consuming labor of anticipating needs and solving problems for a busy family.

Studies show that men in different-sex marriages do more household chores today than they did a generation ago. That’s a good thing in terms of overall marital satisfaction. But a well-meaning husband who tells his wife, “I’ll help, just tell me what you want done,” may not grasp the mental and emotional burden associated with assuming the role of household manager. Absent effective communication, it’s a dynamic that can transform a marriage from a loving partnership into a dispassionate, businesslike arrangement over time.

Experts say that adherence to traditional gender roles explains part of the mental load divide. Despite the advancements that women have made in the public sphere (to pursue an education, excel in a career, be a leader in the community), studies show they still take on more of the domestic duties in different-sex marriages. Beliefs persist about the talents that a particular gender brings to certain tasks—that women are better at hiring babysitters or organizing the family photos, for example. But it’s debatable how much of those competencies are innate versus learned or reinforced through cultural norms.

Tiffany Mimms, a clinical psychologist who runs the Rosetta Center for Counseling and Wellness in Sacramento, questions how much progress women have made in the domestic realm. “Are gender roles really changing? We’ve added on new opportunities for women, but we are still dragging this old stuff around,” says Mimms, a mother of three. “I cringe when I hear, ‘You can have it all.’ I can’t. What I hear is, ‘Have it all, do it all.’”


It’s worth noting that the division of labor looks very different among same-sex couples. A 2015 study by the Families and Work Institute found that same-sex couples were more likely to share chores and to divide duties based on personal preference. If egalitarian relationships do indeed provide the greatest satisfaction (and research tells us they do), then same-sex marriages may offer a model to strive for.

Regardless of whether the couple is same-sex or different-sex, the shifting shape of family life itself—particularly the increased

expectations placed on parents to volunteer at school, oversee homework, transport children to after-school activities, and maintain a robust social life—adds to the mental load. The carefree days when kids roamed the neighborhood independently while mom cooked a pot roast and dad left work at 5 o’clock are the stuff of fiction for today’s families, for better or for worse.

The changing nature of work life is also shaping how modern families tackle the mental load. Nontraditional work schedules, for example, can offer more flexibility to a family, or they can wreak havoc on a household calendar because of their unpredict-

ability. Technology and the ability to field emails and texts far from the office, meanwhile, means that work is more likely to bleed into family time than ever before. The rise of freelancing has also blurred

 *“What I hear is, ‘Have it all, do it all.’” —Tiffany Mimms, clinical psychologist*

the line between home and work. And an economy in which dual incomes is a financial necessity for many families complicates the question of who will manage household and child care responsibilities.

There are other factors that families have to address when it comes to mental labor. Mimms, whose practice is focused on serving African-American women, points out that women of color must also contend with issues related to race and identity that add to the mental load. For example, would the kids benefit from after-school activities that provide cultural affirmation? Does the school curriculum speak to their reality? Likewise, in families with a child who has special needs, there is an additional layer of responsibilities that need to be managed, such as medical appointments and therapy sessions.

Whatever the drivers behind the mental load, those who carry it are often tired and stressed out by their role. Mimms says that many of the women she sees in her practice feel run-down by the demands of modern family life. “The daily hum—it’s like this chronic condition of motherhood,” she says. “Moms’ minds are constantly going in a way that I don’t think a lot of the dads’ are. Insomnia is something I talk with a lot of my female clients about—waking up in the middle of the night thinking about all of the things they need to do.”

To better understand the phenomenon of the mental load, we looked at how four Sacramento families are tackling it.

“It’s not humanly possible for one person to do all of this.”

When Justin and Cassie Ulrich first had children 17 years ago, both spouses were working and sharing parenting and household duties fairly equally. That setup changed, however, when Cassie quit work and went back to school to become a registered nurse while Justin took on more shifts (he is also a nurse) to make up for Cassie’s lost income. “I started becoming the organizer,” recalls Cassie. “The more I did, the less he did. At the time, I was happy to do it.”

The division of labor worked well until Cassie graduated and returned to her career. “I went back to work full time, but my workload in the house didn’t go back.” Even though both spouses were working outside the home, Cassie still assumed responsi-

bility for tracking their two kids' schedules, volunteering at school, setting up car pool and more. Cassie, who also managed all of the household bills, tried to lighten her load by teaching Justin her system for bookkeeping, but she reclaimed the task when things fell through the cracks.

"I never thought that I would be a '50s housewife but also have to go to work," says Cassie, "and that's what I think happened. Women fought for the right to go to work and to do all these things, but somehow we didn't really give up all that much of what we were doing at home."

As Cassie's resentment grew, arguments became more frequent. The couple went through a period of financial hardship that strained the marriage. "I felt like everything was on my shoulders," she says. "I was the one dealing with the bank, the Realtor, everything at school. I came pretty close to having a nervous breakdown. I thought, *It's not humanly possible for one person to do all of this.*"

Justin, for his part, "never realized she felt she was doing all of the work." As they attempted to redistribute the workload, "I was still in the old groove, and it made her frustrated with me when I didn't get stuff done." Cassie, meanwhile, struggled with how to respond to his offers to help. "I was like, 'What do you mean you want to help me? This is our family, this is our household. This isn't *my* problem, it's *our* problem.'"

Things came to a head one day after they lost their house and were living in a rental. "We had this huge blowout," recalls Cassie. "Since then, he's been way more aware of what's on my plate. He's been more present on the day-to-day functioning of things. And I've gotten better at asking for help early and not letting things spiral out of control."

Cassie has arrived at a place of acceptance. "I used to get a lot angrier about it, but I've gotten to the point where I realize we all have our strengths." Justin, meanwhile, has come to appreciate what Cassie brings to the household. "I couldn't imagine going on without her," he says.

"We've done the best that we can with the division of labor."

Like many couples, Phillip and Catherine Zepp contend with a work schedule that complicates life for them and their 11-year-old son. Phillip, who works as a truck driver, has a fluctuating schedule and receives just a few days' notice of what days and hours he'll be working. "It's challenging in a variety of ways, living in this tentative lifestyle," says Catherine, an administrator for a nonprofit law firm.

Because Catherine's schedule is more predictable and she is routinely home with their son before school and in the evenings, she assumes more of what she calls the "administrative tasks" of the household. On Phillip's days off, "he will pitch in in extra areas because he knows I have been overwhelmed and stressed out."

One source of conflict is the couple's different approaches to handling certain duties, a problem that is compounded because Catherine is often parenting solo. "There are some things that he feels are important to be followed to a T, whereas I'm much more flexible," says Catherine. "It has taken quite a few conversations with him to be able to say, 'You're the one there, so I can trust you to make that decision.'"

Catherine is quick to note that she sees no ill intent behind their uneven division of labor. As she puts it, "Phil has had a

crappy schedule for eight years. We're still not perfect at it." But honest communication has helped. "I can get to a point when I'm starting to feel bitter. Then I have to say in the nicest way possible, 'This is where I'm at, this is how you can help,'" she

explains. "Being able to verbalize that in as non-emotional a way as possible has really helped us."

The couple talks openly to

their son about the contributions that both spouses make to the household. And they have introduced him to a variety of chores, from laundry to yard work, says Catherine, "so that he knows that anyone is capable of doing them."

As to whether sharing the mental load equally is possible, Catherine is skeptical. "I don't necessarily think that the normal tasks of running a household and raising a family are things that can be evenly divided. We've had to work hard to get to a place where we are mostly on the same page and at least compassionate and merciful to the other partner, who is trying their best."

"He's got his role and I have mine."

Even before Sukhjit and Colleen Johl had children, they agreed that Colleen would stay home full time to care for them. "We both grew up with stay-at-home moms, and we wanted the same for our kids," says Colleen, who left her career as a bank executive before their first child was born. Sukhjit, meanwhile, maintains a demanding schedule as a surgeon.

The couple's division of labor is clear-cut: Sukhjit is the breadwinner for their family of four, while Colleen handles the mental load associated with childrearing and running a household, from helping with homework to managing the family's social obligations to volunteering at her children's school.

It's an arrangement that, for the most part, works well for their family. "I knew marrying a doctor that there were certain things that were going to fall primarily on me," explains Colleen. "He's got his role and I have mine, and we try to help where we can."

Still, there are times when Colleen feels the strain of her responsibilities. "The hardest times are the weekends," she says. "Part of it is that I have to train my kids better. I feel like I'm still doing everything on the weekends. I'm still cooking the meals, I'm still cleaning up, doing the dishes, so sometimes I get a little frustrated because I'm doing it and everyone else is sitting around having a good time." Days off are a luxury. "I don't get a sick day," Colleen says. "My job doesn't end; it's 24/7."

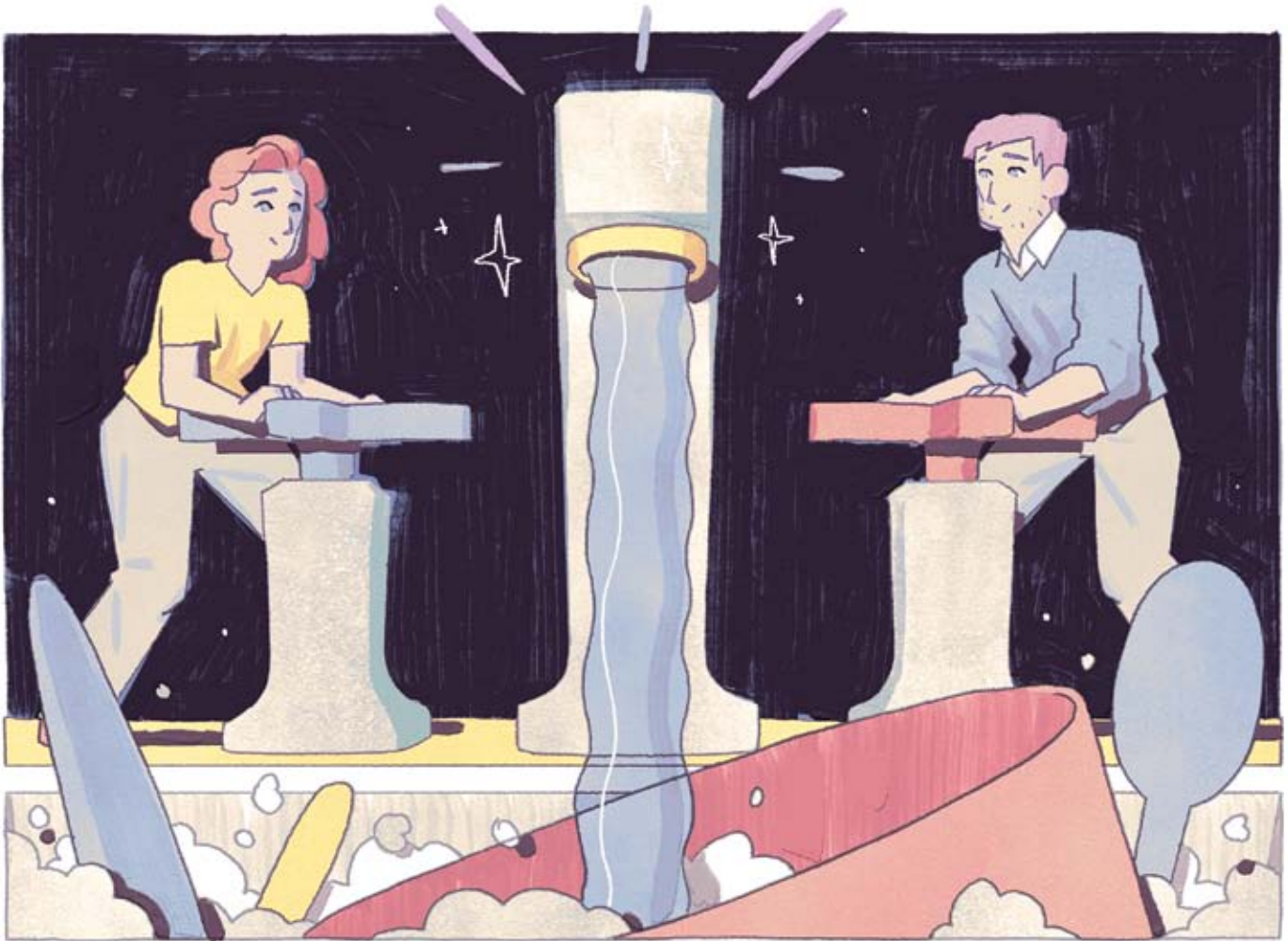
Although she laments that being a stay-at-home mom "is underappreciated because it's not a job that you're being paid for," Colleen is grateful that she has the option to be a full-time caregiver. And she seems to accept that perhaps no arrangement is perfect. "I don't know that there's anything I would change."

"The gender-role assumption just gets thrown out the window."

Like the Johls, Jenn and Monica Baumbach planned for one of them—Monica—to be home with their children full time while Jenn pursued her career as an OB-GYN. That leaves Monica to spearhead the majority of the household and child care responsibilities, including coordinating therapy sessions for their younger son, who has autism. "I joke that she is the CEO and



Find a moment to sit and talk. The payoff is huge.



I'm the chief operating officer," says Monica, who previously worked as an IT project manager.

On the days when Jenn is home, however, "we definitely divide things" close to evenly, Jenn says. In fact, it's not uncommon for her to "maybe even take on more" so that Monica can take a break from the frontlines of caring for two young boys. Theirs is a fluid partnership characterized by open communication and each spouse pitching in where needed.

They both tell stories of straight friends who marvel at the egalitarianism of their relationship. "When we have friends over for dinner, for example, they'll comment on the way we clean up together," says Monica. The couple chafes at the idea of having to ask a spouse for help with things like changing a diaper or cleaning up after a meal. As Jenn puts it, "I'm not your parent and I'm not your boss. We're supposed to be partners in this."

It's not as though the two parents are totally interchangeable. Monica, for example, is more skilled in the kitchen, while Jenn prefers to handle the household bills. But both reject the stereotypical gender roles that different-sex couples often contend with. "Everything still has to be done, but the gender-role assumption just gets thrown out the window," asserts Monica.

Still, there are occasional disagreements. "It's not so much the doling out that causes conflict; it's more the timing that's the issue," says Jenn. "I prioritize things that I consider more urgent and push other things to the side. But sometimes she doesn't want to wait because it bugs her."

The couple manages to smooth out any relationship wrinkles

by openly expressing their mutual gratitude. "I tell her often how much I appreciate how hard she works and that her one income gives us all a great life," says Monica. "And she lets me know she appreciates all the stuff I do for the boys."

Regardless of whether the mental workload can ever be shared equally, there are ways in which partners can do a better job of supporting one another in their respective roles. Mimms contends that communication is key.

"Couples need to carve out the time to do a true assessment of where they're at, how things are working, how they're feeling and what they're needing instead of waiting for those meltdowns," she says. "Then be creative about solutions, because there are ways we can make some small shifts that might have a larger impact than we realize." In Mimms' household, for example, her husband has taken over bringing their girls to medical appointments because she is self-employed and stands to lose income during that time off, whereas her husband doesn't. By shifting just one task from her column to his, it eases her burden.

Mimms also emphasizes that the individual not carrying the bulk of the mental load doesn't necessarily have bad intentions. "In most situations, both partners want this to work, but they don't always have the same vision of how it's going to happen." Understanding where both people are coming from can help.

"We need to validate that we're in this together, so how can we work together to get through it. When we find a moment to sit and talk, the payoff is huge." ❧