

Wellbeing

## WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL LOAD AND HOW TO MANAGE IT

Sharon Green | November 26, 2017



Mental load – it’s the planning, organising, checking, list-making, remembering and any other mental work you do to manage your life. It’s work that is tiring, never-ending and invisible. And women are most affected by it.

The concept was aptly described by French cartoonist Emma, which has become a phenomenon online. The illustration, titled [You Should’ve Asked](#), shows mental load and its impact on working mothers.

The comic begins with a story of an overworked mother who juggles tending to her children while trying to cook a meal for a friend she has invited over for dinner. Things get out of control and the dinner boils over and spills on to the floor. The mother, exacerbated, claims that things got out of control because she “had to do everything”. The husband responds by saying he would’ve helped if she had just asked him to. The comic goes on to explain that husbands shouldn’t have to be asked to step in and help, and that mothers shouldn’t be solely responsible for directing them and planning everything.

It’s a story that sounds all too familiar but it is real and happening, and mental load disproportionately falls to women.

Data from the [2016 Australian Census](#) shows that employed women do more hours of unpaid domestic work such as housework, grocery shopping, gardening and repairs than employed men.

The data shows that Australian women spend, on average, five to 14 hours per week doing unpaid domestic work, whereas the average for men is less than five hours per week.

Yet, these statistics fail to measure the additional time women spend planning and organising these domestic activities, also known as mental load.

## THE IMPACT OF MENTAL LOAD

Clinical psychologist [Dr Samantha Clarke](#) said mental load has always been something that women have experienced but over the past few decades this has significantly increased due to the number of roles that women play in modern society.

“We are often the primary care giver and homemaker, careers are often still very important to us, we are often quite engaged with our extended families, friendships and community. All of these factors place a load on women,” she said.

Dr Clarke said women were more prone to the impacts of mental load because of the greater number of roles women tend to play and the expectations that come with those roles.

But the impacts of mental load are far-reaching and have real, long-term consequences.

Mental health nurse [Naomi Elizabeth](#) said mental load was becoming a key trigger in the development of chronic stress, depression and anxiety.

“The constant need to be ‘switched on and ready’ increases our production of adrenaline, the fight or flight hormone. When this hormone is produced continually, it causes your bodying mind to stay on, resulting in increased stress and poor mental health,” she said.

Clinical psychotherapist [Natajsa Wagner](#) said taking on mental load is effectively like being the project manager and people manager of not just your own life but that of your family members and your household.

“Women who experience mental load can be left feeling overwhelmed by the never-ending to-do list. They often feel stressed and anxious due to anticipating what comes next. Guilt also often plays a role when they don’t get everything done that they believe they ‘should’. If left unchecked, mental load can lead to burn out and exhaustion,” she said.



A snippet from mental load comic 'You Should've Asked' by French cartoonist Emma. Source: [english.emmaclit.com](http://english.emmaclit.com)

## WHY DO WOMEN BEAR THE BRUNT OF MENTAL LOAD?

Women have arrived here because we've historically been the household managers and we've been conditioned to be the caretakers.

Ms Wagner said while women are wired to be nurturers and caregivers, and our brains are designed for multitasking, the social conditioning women have faced throughout the generations has also had a big impact on how they see their roles in their family and in society.

This has also had an impact on how men see female roles and the expectations they place on women, she said.

"Being raised by mothers and grandmothers who took the traditional role of full time homemaker carries a silent undertone and message to women – that it's our responsibility to manage the household," Ms Wagner said.

"Perfectionism and the need to please others is another key reason that women can become mentally overloaded. Many women feel that not being able to 'do everything' is a sign of weakness or that they are not good enough if they can't cope with and manage everything on their own."

## HOW CAN WE MANAGE MENTAL LOAD?

Rather than continue to feel overwhelmed by all the thinking, planning and remembering that comes with mental load, there are practical and actionable things that women can do to manage it.

Here are some tips:

### Delegate

Many women experience mental load because they feel they have to do everything and if they don't, things won't get done. But we need to respect ourselves enough to know we have limits and can't do it all, Ms Elizabeth said.

“Start simple by creating a roster of household chores. Include your partner, kids, housemates; whoever lives in the house can help out. This will help lighten your load and also encourage more connection and responsibility between the family (or household),” she said.

If the kids are old enough, get them to pack their own lunches. If your husband has a meeting and needs a shirt ironed, leave him to do it.

### **Allocate defined chores**

This one involves self-discipline but once you get used to it, it becomes easy to adhere to. Stick with your defined tasks and responsibilities, and refuse to take on your partner’s chores.

For example, you may decide that each week you will be responsible for doing meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking and laundry, while your partner will be responsible for washing dishes, cleaning the bathroom, vacuuming and taking out the rubbish bins.

Set an agreed deadline to get chores done by (e.g. by Sunday afternoons) and trust that your partner will do their fair share in that time, without having to be reminded or nagged. This means there is no arguing over who does what and each party understands that they need to complete their tasks by a set time.

### **Outsource the ‘thinking and remembering’**

A huge part of mental load is having to account for so many tasks and schedules. Some of these things can be outsourced so that you don’t have to think about it or remember it every time, which may help reduce the load.

If you think you or your partner might forget about doing a repeat chore, such as taking out the bins every Thursday night, set a recurring electronic calendar reminder so they will be reminded to do the task each week. If they still forget or don’t do the task despite having a reminder, you’ll need to learn to let it go.

For regular payments such as rent and bills, set up direct debits to ensure they get paid on time without expending the mental energy every time to do so.

### **Take time out**

When it comes to managing mental load, self-care is incredibly important said Dr Clarke.

“The ability to be resilient also comes down to how we take care of ourselves – how we move, how we eat, how we sleep and how we take time out mentally. Being able to address these four areas in a healthy way will assist you with how you cope with mental load. So, even if you have a lot on you are able to be more resilient with that load,” she said.

If you need some time off from all the demands, can you take a break? Maybe it’s a few hours, a day, a week or a month. Taking breaks will also help you to gain clarity on which portion of the mental load is critical and which is unnecessary.

### **Reduce your expectations**

On the surface, it doesn’t sound like an ideal solution but have you actually tried to care less about some of the things that contribute to your mental load? Does it really matter if the sheets are not folded to your liking or that you can’t prepare a wholesome, balanced dinner every night of the week?

It’s also not realistic to have a picture-perfect house like the ones you see in magazines or on Instagram, so stop placing unnecessary pressure on yourself.

