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TECH | FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON

Moms Are Struggling With Burnout. Is It More Work to Let Dads Help?

Sarah Sperry was on autopilot as she worked long hours, cared for three children and carried the mental load of her household. Then she had a panic attack at work.

Her husband, Chris Sperry, didn't realize how overwhelmed she had become with scheduling doctor's appointments, keeping track of the kids' homework and managing the mom text chains. The reason? She didn't talk about it or try to delegate, until she couldn't take it anymore.

Moms have been struggling to hold it together for a long time. They have become extreme multitaskers, playing whack-a-mole with emails, texts, calendar apps and other alerts— technology that both helps and adds to the feelings of overwhelm.

The pandemic only magnified the burden of this unpaid, and often unacknowledged, labor. Motherly, a women's well-being company, surveyed more than 17,000 mostly millennial and Gen Z mothers for its annual "State of Motherhood" survey in March. It found nearly half are their families' primary breadwinners. And half of that subset said they still handle a majority of the household chores, while even more report managing kids' schedules and coordinating child care.

The result is exhaustion. Many women have either exited the workforce or re-evaluated their career goals as a result of burnout.



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Sarah and Chris

Ms. Sperry had been working her way up in finance for many years while starting a family in the San Francisco Bay Area. She had begun working right out of college and never took a break between jobs.

During the pandemic, she reached a breaking point. “I was running on fumes,” she said.



She said even though her husband was very involved, it was the mental tasks that killed her. Just the amount of texts she was fielding from other moms organizing carpools and playdates was dizzying. “Those are examples my husband would never know about because he’s not looking at my phone,” she said. “That’s mental energy you’re not even realizing you’re expending.”

The job, the household chores and the constant planning led to chronic stress, anxiety and health problems for Ms. Sperry—not to mention irritation with her husband.

Mr. Sperry, a portfolio manager who must remain at his desk during stock-trading hours, said he realized how much his wife was taking on during the pandemic shutdown, with her work and managing the kids’ remote school.

“Even when I tried to do as much as I could, the burden of being a mom is always there,” he said. “I was like, ‘I’ll cook dinner, go grocery shopping and do the laundry,’ but that’s utility stuff.” He added, “Even if our tasks are even, hers are more mentally draining than mine.”

They started seeing a therapist and learned to communicate better. She decided to step back from the corporate world and start a health-coaching business for women. They said they’re dividing up tasks more but haven’t settled on an app or calendar system to keep track.

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“Some of this is us learning to let go and me learning I’m not Superwoman and that I do need help,” Ms. Sperry said.

What you can do

Discuss expectations. Motherly Chief Executive Jill Koziol said couples can begin by talking about how they were raised and how their family should operate similarly or differently. “All of the apps and tech solutions can come once there’s acknowledgment of the problem,” she said.

Do a daily check-in. Just like with exercise, couples should set aside time to communicate, Ms. Rodsky said. It can be 10 minutes at night to ask your partner what’s on his or her plate. That can help each partner understand what the other is juggling and set the stage for asking for help.



Lay out your cards. Ms. Rodsky developed a system for sharing domestic responsibilities based on making each partner’s invisible tasks visible. She created a game using a stack of 100 cards, each listing a different task, such as paying bills or planning birthday parties. (Ms. Sperry, in launching her own business, became certified to train clients to use Ms. Rodsky’s “Fair Play” system, and could receive referrals from Ms. Rodsky’s company in the future.)

The idea, she said, isn’t for each partner’s stack to be the same size but to own the tasks you take on from start to finish.

“When I interviewed men, they didn’t say ‘I don’t want to do more in the home.’ They said, ‘I’m not doing anything right,’” Ms. Rodsky said. “When men started to take on the conception, planning and execution of just one task, it was better than when they said they did half the work.”