



## *Perspective/Opinion*

# **Take A Load Off. Make it Visible. – Unpacking Mental Load**

By Jessica Phelps, MD – Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry

*The IWill 3.0 Gender-Equity Pledge Campaign begins March 2, 2023, with the [AWSM WHM Symposium](#) and the theme, "Broadening Gender Norms – Mitigating Stereotypes." One potential pledge will be: "I Will explore how my expectations of gender roles affect the division of labor in my workplace and/or household, including mental load." This week, Jessica Phelps, MD reflects on that pledge...*

"This child has two parents. Please alternate calls. It's his father's turn." I always recall this bold quote from former United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, reflecting on her experience as a working mother. She was assertive, to the point, and ahead of her time. While it seems like a simple statement, it is so hard to live it, to own it.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a physician... and a mom. The duties involved seemed so similar. Surely one could do both, right? I work in a field where boundaries and limits are critical, but throw parenthood into the mix, and things get complicated quickly. As a busy professional, I learned to organize and prioritize well. As a two-physician household with no family in our time zone, we knew we needed a plan to merge our professional passions and our family goals, but I was not prepared to balance the extra unspoken load I encountered, known by many as "mental load."

### **Mental Load Defined**

Chances are high that even if you're unfamiliar with the term "mental load," the concept is part of your life. Mental load is the cognitive effort and related resources used to manage others that is often not tangible. Some use the term "invisible labor" as a synonym. It is derived from a 1980s concept of "emotional labor", coined by Dr. Arlie Hochschild, which she defines as "emotion management and life management combined. It is the unpaid, invisible work we do to keep those around us comfortable and happy. It envelops many other terms associated with the type of care-based labor... emotion work, the mental load, mental burden, domestic

management, clerical labor, invisible labor” (Beck, 2018). In 2017, French feminist Emma Clit began using the term “mental load” in her now famous, and oh, so relatable blog that demonstrates mental load in illustrations (Clit, 2017). Mental load discussions are still current and all over social media. So, what does mental load entail? It is the anticipating, planning and coordinating, flexing and shifting of schedules, needs and wants of your entire household in an effort to ensure their health, safety, and overall wellbeing. This load often falls to women in families, relationships, and at work. Yes, mental load is everywhere. Sounds overwhelming, doesn’t it?

### **Assess and Destress**

With awareness, we have the power to create change. There are many potential lenses we could use to explore mental load because it is everywhere and all encompassing. While the topic of mental load is gradually entering academic medicine, for our larger MCW community, I think it most relevant to begin by examining mental load at home. On a typical day or in a typical week, what is on your written to do list? What is on your mental to do list? What tasks become part of your day almost invisibly without making it to any list? Revisiting this step over time often helps bring me back – “no wonder I’ve felt at a loss for time this week!”

We need to check in with ourselves on a deeper level. Societally, mental load most often falls to women, but I also notice that I perpetuate this for myself at times. I want to do *all* the planning around our kids, I set high expectations for myself to reorganize our home during “vacation days” (yikes!), or I refuse help because I feel I can do something more efficiently. What expectations are you holding yourself to, why, and are they reasonable?

Recognizing our personal mental load isn’t enough though. We must share and discuss our mental load with our partner to help us each prioritize family, professional and personal goals. Even with regular discussion, it’s easy to lose track of all that one does in a day. You cannot do it all on your own, even if you *may* do it better. Learn who is a combination of best at, most efficient with, and minds the least any particular task, and then divide tasks. Take into consideration available time, which can vary based on short- and long-term schedules.

If you are able to divide some tasks weighing on your mental load, what are your expectations? The way in which your partner makes lunches, shops for a birthday gift, or folds the laundry is likely different from your way. It is important to communicate the needs in these tasks (lunch must be peanut free) and reflect on the style differences with which you struggle to part (towels folded in thirds look neater). Maybe while looking at your combined priorities, expectations, and loads, you realize together that outsourcing some tasks (age-appropriate chores for kids, hiring landscapers for lawn care, buying a cake at the bakery) is an option, or even better – cross some items off your list and load altogether. Pure glee.

Just because your mental load is lightened on paper, doesn’t mean it can’t or won’t re-accumulate. One must be mindful to tend to your load individually and with your partner to

keep it in good shape, allowing you time for other endeavors that hopefully allow you to relax and recharge. With this newfound time that is YOURS, embrace the things that energize you, and limit the things that don't.

### **Bringing it into the Light**

The COVID-19 pandemic rocked our worlds and roles unexpectedly, creating rapid changes for everyone, and perhaps bringing forth some much-needed reflection on expectations across genders at home and in the workplace. We all need to explore how to address mental load in our environments to best support ourselves and each other.

As we continue to grow through this process, we need to remember to learn from each other. I strive to model and candidly discuss a healthier mental load balance for our children, so they may enter adulthood with a better ability to manage and prioritize for themselves and others, ideally helping them to be better partners and colleagues. I cannot fully express my gratitude for examples of this balance I found within my department during training. As an attending, I've also had the amazing luck to find a physician mom mentor who worked through similar mental load challenges when her children were young, and I continue to find our friendship to be invaluable. I hope to be an ear for others working through their own loads. Our mental loads cannot be invisible any longer. While I still fight the urge to manage it all at times, I continue to challenge myself to "please alternate calls" as Justice Ginsburg boldly encouraged.

*For further reading:*

[Beck J. \(2018\). The Concept Creep of 'Emotional Labor.' The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/arlne-hochschild-housework-isnt-emotional-labor/576637/>](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/arlne-hochschild-housework-isnt-emotional-labor/576637/)

[Clit E. \(2017, May 20\). You Should've Asked. Emma. \[www.english.emmaclit.com/2017/05/20/you-shouldve-asked/\]\(http://www.english.emmaclit.com/2017/05/20/you-shouldve-asked/\)](http://www.english.emmaclit.com/2017/05/20/you-shouldve-asked/)

[Lacour V. \(n.d.\) The Mental Load: Why Learning About it will You're your Life Better? KeiSei Magazine. <https://keiseimagazine.com/the-mental-load-why-learning-about-it-will-make-your-life-better/#:~:text=Although%20the%20term%20%E2%80%9Cmental%20load,systematically%20fall%20on%20women's%20shoulders>](https://keiseimagazine.com/the-mental-load-why-learning-about-it-will-make-your-life-better/#:~:text=Although%20the%20term%20%E2%80%9Cmental%20load,systematically%20fall%20on%20women's%20shoulders)

Hitti E, Hadid D, Khoury SJ, Tamim H, Makki M, Karam CM (2022). Domestic tethers: Gender differences in career paths and domestic responsibilities of top-research medical school graduates. PLoS One, Apr 20;17(4): doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0267288.

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*Jessica Phelps, MD is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry, Child, and Adolescent Division, at MCW. She is a JEDI member and trainer within the Department of Psychiatry, a Coalition Builder with the [National Coalition Builder's Institute](#), and her clinical niche involves caring for families with a history of trauma. She is the mother of three young boys and wife to a physician, working 0.6 FTE in an effort to balance her time across roles.*