

Less depression for working moms who expect that they 'can't do it all'

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Working moms have lower rates of depression than their stay-at-home counterparts, but buying into the supermom myth could put working mothers at greater risk for depression.

A new study shows that working mothers who expressed a supermom attitude that work and home lives can be blended with relative ease showed more [depression symptoms](#) than working moms who expected that they would have to forego some aspects of their career or parenting to achieve a work-life balance.

"Women are sold a story that they can do it all, but most [workplaces](#) are still designed for employees without child-care responsibilities," said Katrina Leupp, a University of Washington sociology graduate student who led the study. In reality, juggling home and work lives requires some sacrifice, she said, such as cutting back on work hours and getting husbands to help more.

"You can happily combine child rearing and a career, if you're willing to let some things slide," Leupp said. She will present her study Aug. 21 at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting in Las Vegas, Nev.

Leupp analyzed survey responses from 1,600 women, all 40 years old and married, across the United States. The respondents, a mix of stay-at-home moms and [working mothers](#), were participating in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, administered by the U.S. Department of

Labor.

As young adults, the women answered questions about work-life balance by ranking how much they agreed with statements, such as "A woman who fulfills her family responsibilities doesn't have time for a job outside the home," "Working wives lead to more juvenile delinquency" and "A woman is happiest if she can stay at home with her children."

Then, when the women were 40, Leupp measured their levels of depression.

She found that the stay-at-home moms had more depression symptoms than the working moms in the study, which agrees with findings from other studies.

"Employment is ultimately beneficial for women's health, even when differences in marital satisfaction and working full or part time are ruled out," said Leupp. She added that there is some truth to the adage, "Stay-at-home moms have the hardest job in the world."

But among the working moms in the study, Leupp found that those with the supermom attitude – who as [young adults](#) consistently agreed with statements that women can combine employment and family care – were at a higher risk for depression compared with working moms who had a more realistic view.

"Employed women who expected that work-life balance was going to be hard are probably more likely to accept that they can't do it all," Leupp said. These moms may be more comfortable making tradeoffs, such as leaving work early to pick up kids, and, Leupp shows they have fewer depression symptoms.

But women who expect that work and family life can be satisfactorily

combined without many tradeoffs may be more likely to feel like they are failing when they struggle to achieve this ideal. Guilt over not being able to manage the work-family balance and frustration over division of household labor could also play roles in the increase of depression symptoms in the supermom group.

"Supermoms have higher expectations for fairness, so it makes sense that they would be more frustrated with the division of household chores," Leupp said.

So, should superdads help? Perhaps. Leupp did not include fathers in her study, but says that most men don't cut back on employment hours to accommodate child rearing.

"Employment is still ultimately good for women's health," Leupp said. "But for better mental health, working moms should accept that they can't do it all."

Provided by University of Washington

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