

Health hacks from motherhood through menopause

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The pain hit one morning when Dr. Darria Long Gillespie tried to get out of bed. Her hands and feet were swollen and aching. At the time, she was in residency for emergency medicine at Yale. She had to see patients, but had trouble walking or standing for long periods of time. Long Gillespie was eventually diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis that would require biweekly injections of medication to control the symptoms. The moment marked a turning point in her life.

"When I was told that my health has to be this way, I knew every other woman was hearing it but may not have the resources to not take no for an answer," she said. Now the married mother of two, who weaned herself from the arthritis medication in 2011, has become a fierce advocate for women's health, particularly mothers—who she believes are increasingly in peril.

Women are experiencing chronic stress, and they are dealing with chronic diseases at younger ages, Long Gillespie said. "That is likely due to our lifestyles and that is scary, but it also provides some promise. If it has do with our lifestyle, then we can figure it out," she said.

Long Gillespie is one of two Georgia-based doctors who have recently released books to help women address the myriad stresses in their lives from motherhood through menopause. Combining their [personal experiences](#) with professional expertise, the doctors offer practical guidance to help women get their lives back in balance.

Although Women's History Month has come to an end, there is still a need to focus on the successes of women and for women to care for themselves as much as they care for others. That so many women are struggling to get their lives in balance indicates a larger problem.

'A HIGH BURDEN ON OURSELVES'

American women are being pushed to the limit by a society that expects them to be as invested in motherhood as they are in the traditional workforce, while offering little assistance or incentive for them to fully realize both roles, said Amy Westervelt, author of "Forget Having It All."

As a corporate employee in the financial services industry, Kristen Watt, the mom of a 1-year-old, has intimate experience with the push and pull of being a working mom. Her husband, a consultant, is out of town four days a week. "The stresses are constant and the guilt is the thing that no one really prepares you for," said Watt, 31, "As women, we put a high burden on ourselves to be all things to all people at all times and it just isn't realistic."

Though her company has made great strides in creating balance for all employees—she has flex time and the ability to work remotely—Watt said many companies have yet to make the kind of systemic changes that do not put motherhood and work in opposition as Westervelt described. "What makes it difficult is when you are a parent and you feel like you are getting a special concession because you are a parent," Watt said. "That is a systemic problem with organizations in general."

In recent years, Westervelt has observed an explosion of books, [academic research](#) and even television shows focused on the misery of American moms. She thinks it amounts to the intense pressure being placed on women in almost every aspect of their lives. "A lot of the talk

around this stuff is focused on policy fixes and that is great, but we have a lot of examples of policy failing because culture hasn't changed," Westervelt said.

So what is a [woman](#) to do while she waits for society to catch up? She can start by making changes in her own life. "I think some of these individual changes we make inside our homes can ripple out to our communities," Westervelt said. "You can't really be part of pushing for broader systemic change if things are totally upside-down in your life."

Upside-down is how Dr. Anna Cabeca would describe her life in 2006, the year her 18-month-old son died in a tragic drowning incident. "I know what it feels like to want to die and to have hurt from the moment you put your feet on the floor in the morning," said Cabeca, a retired obstetrician and gynecologist.

The tragedy plunged her into early menopause and ovarian failure at age 38. Cabeca wanted more children, but fellow doctors gave her no hope. She delved into integrative medicine. She increased plant-based foods in her diet and took her entire family on a yearlong sojourn with stops in Australia and Indonesia where she climbed mountains and met with a traditional healer. In 2008, her youngest daughter was born.

INCHING TOWARD LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Both Long Gillespie and Cabeca hope to empower women to conquer the challenges that are wearing down their lives and their health by turning their decades of research and experience into actionable advice.

As a clinical assistant professor at the University of Tennessee School of Medicine, Long Gillespie, 40, born to a nuclear physicist-trained mom and business owner dad, said she still has a passion for caring for people in emergency situations. Women's health, she said, is at a critical

juncture. Recognizing the limited bandwidth that most women have, Long Gillespie distilled years of research and advice into 110 hacks.

"Mom Hacks" provides shortcuts that make it easier for women to take small steps that add up to big changes. "That comes directly out of my ER training," said Long Gillespie, who has lived in Atlanta since 2013 and does a regular segment debunking health myths on HLN's "On the Story" with Lynn Smith. "The best solution isn't always an ideal comprehensive answer. Sometimes, it is the right step you can take at the right moment," she said.

The book is divided into four sections, which offer strategies to reset our bodies' reactions to chronic stress and our circadian rhythms by developing healthy habits and creating an environment where the easy decision is the healthy decision. Resilience is also key, and Long Gillespie encourages women to find ways to set intentions, stop multitasking, and let go of the supermom myth.

Debra Shigley, a mom of five children under age 8, realized somewhere around child number four that the perfectionist strictures imposed on many moms no longer applied to her. "When you have a lot of kids, everyone assumes it is chaos, so there is less pressure to do everything perfectly. It gives you the freedom to just be," said Shigley.

Shigley, 39, of Atlanta has employed several hacks to keep life running smoothly—listening to motivational podcasts during her drives, committing to a weekly Pilates class, opting into a local produce delivery service—but mostly, she tries to stay in the moment. "What it means for me is literally taking it event by event, like, I made it to soccer practice today," she said. At the end of her toughest days, she takes the time to give herself a big hug and tell herself that she did a great job.

These small actions are similar to those offered by Long Gillespie to

help women inch closer to full-on lifestyle changes. If you have trouble waking up in the morning, set your thermostat to start warming the house an hour before wake-up time. Time-restricted eating—in nine- or 12-hour intervals—can help you lose weight naturally rather than struggling with restrictive diets. You can reduce the likelihood of mindless eating by not keeping utensils near your snacks such as that knife tucked inside the cake plate. "The things people are making hard don't have to be hard," Long Gillespie said. "If you just do one hack—one minimum viable action—you will feel more in control."

SEEKING WAYS TO HEAL

Cabeca, 52, began trying to take control of her family's health when she was just a teen growing up in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. When Cabeca was 16, her mother, an immigrant from the Middle East, underwent cardiac bypass surgery. Cabeca was heartbroken when her mother died at age 67, many years before her mother's siblings who had remained in war-torn countries. It was evidence to Cabeca that stress was not only the result of external factors.

After reversing her early menopause and becoming a mom at age 41, Cabeca still grappled with the effects of grief. She and her husband were unable to overcome the stress on their marriage and divorced, leaving Cabeca as a single, working mom of four daughters. She suffered from insomnia, sleeping about three hours on any given night. She began experiencing brain fog. She had emotional ups and downs. When she found herself facing menopause for the second time, she resorted to a carb-restricted diet but found herself irritable and on edge.

Cabeca believed [chronic stress](#) was creating an acidic environment in her body and making her feel bad, so she added more alkaline foods, including low-carb grains and plant-based foods. Over time, she could think more clearly and lost the stubborn 20 pounds that had seemed to

pile on overnight. But while nutrition is important, it is only part of the solution, she said. "It is about 25 percent what we eat, but when we eat, how we eat, the emotions we are eating and who we are eating with is going to affect our physiology," Cabeca said.

Even before becoming a mom two years ago, Phaedra Campbell had mastered some of the solutions Cabeca relied on for her own healing. Campbell, 33, of Atlanta is a longtime practitioner of yoga and ate a predominantly plant-based diet. When her daughter was born, those habits became the very things that kept her grounded. As a stay-at-home mom with an entrepreneur husband, Campbell relies on her lifestyle to keep her life in balance.

She teaches family yoga at Wolf Creek Library and leads an adult relaxation class at Welcome All Park in South Fulton, which traditionally does not have many yoga options. "There are so many benefits spiritually, and it helps me to share that with other people," said Campbell, who keeps followers updated on Instagram (@Sistah-SAHM).

Though becoming a mom was an identity adjustment, Campbell says having gratitude helps her keep things in perspective. "I have had to just remember that I wanted to be a mother and this is part of my vision. When we can put things in perspective, it is helpful on a day-to-day basis," she said.

After more than 10 years of clinical work with patients, research and her own experience, Cabeca developed the Keto-Green diet, which combines keto—a plan that restricts carbohydrates stored in the body so the body is forced to burn fat for energy—and alkaline eating. As detailed in her book "The Hormone Fix," Cabeca focuses not on the hormones traditionally associated with menopause like estrogen, progesterone and testosterone, but on insulin, cortisol and oxytocin. When those control hormones are balanced, all the other hormones in the

body fall in line, Cabeca said.

Driven by the desire to empower women, Long Gillespie and Cabeca said they hope that sharing their own challenges will help more [women](#) live better lives no matter what they are facing. "Women as a rule are going to look for reasons to defeat ourselves," Cabeca said. "Never give up on yourself, and know you can be better tomorrow no matter what diagnosis you have been given today."

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