

Planning, stress and worry put the mental load on mothers: Will 2022 be the year they share the burden?

January 4 2022, by Leah Ruppanner, Brendan Churchill, Liz Dean



The mental load can last long after your children have left home. Credit: Clem Onojeghuo

The COVID pandemic has made the very private issue of the domestic

division of labor—the way housework and childcare are divided—a very public issue.

During lockdowns, the burden of housework and childcare grew significantly for men and women in [opposite-sex](#) and [same-sex couples](#) both in Australia and [elsewhere](#).

Overnight, homes became offices, childcare centers and makeshift schools and it was mothers who largely stepped into these teaching and caring roles at the expense of their [anxiety levels and sleep](#).

While the pandemic exacerbated the physical demands of care—housework and childcare—it also exacerbated another part of the work that keeps households and families running: the mental load.

What is the mental load?

A lot has been written about the mental load over the past two years, with many confusing the mental load with household labor—cleaning and cooking or caring after children—or planning tasks involved with childcare. But the mental load is so much more.

In our recently published [research](#), we define the mental load as the combination of two types of work or labor: *cognitive labor* and *emotional labor*.

The cognitive aspect of the mental load involves the *scheduling*, *planning*, and *organizing* required to support the smooth operating of families. This type of work ranges from organizing a play date to planning dinner.

We argue this cognitive work becomes *a load* or the mental load when it has an emotional element, for example, when there is worry or stress

attached to these tasks.

Some have described list-making as the mental load, but list-making isn't always stressful or emotional and, importantly, list-making has a finite beginning and end.

But, once cognitive tasks like list-making take on an emotional element—like worry about whether Nana will like her present, anxiety about how relatives will get along at holiday dinners and stress about filling stockings while finishing work—then it becomes the mental load.

How does the mental load operate?

We argue the mental load operates in families and societies in three ways.

First it's *invisible*—it's the type of work that is done internally. Unlike housework or childcare, it's unseen and therefore hard to recognize.

Second, the mental load is *boundaryless*. Because it's invisible, it can be performed anywhere or at anytime.

American sociologist Arlie Hochschild termed women's domestic labor done after work as the "[second shift](#)" but the mental load has no shifts—it can be done before, during and after work or even during time that should be spent sleeping.

And lastly, the mental load is *enduring*, meaning it never ends. Unlike housework such as like cooking or cleaning, thinking and caring about family members never ends, which is why the mental load can be so burdensome and Nana still reminds you to take a jacket.

How can we lessen mental loads in 2022 and beyond?

Individuals and society can do a number of things to decrease the mental load.

(1) Make the mental load more visible by quantifying it

We have no robust, standardized and nationally representative measure of the mental load. This means, unlike housework and childcare, we have no idea the volume and consequences of the mental load for Australians.

Recent reports on [housework](#) show women do 21 more hours of unpaid work than men. They may also spend the bulk of the day thinking about, planning and worrying about their families.

Yet, we have no measure of this labor and, importantly, we don't know how men carry the mental load either.

Quantifying and capturing how much time we spend on the mental load and how this is shared between couples will help lay the groundwork for change.

(2) Acknowledge the toll on women

The pandemic has left workers burnt out, stressed and overwhelmed by the intensity of balancing work, homeschooling and full-time care demands while isolated at home.

It's no wonder the pandemic has knocked [mothers out of employment](#).

Mothers are exhausted not only from the physical demands of work and [family](#) but also the cognitive labor of holding it all together at work while worrying about torpedoing children's educational futures from keeping them home, alone and glued to screens.

The mental load, as the unrelenting internal nag, is a drain on well-being with serious consequences for economic productivity and fatigue.

The mental load is a national health emergency and should be treated seriously by workplaces and governments alike.

(3) Help families better reconcile work and family demands

Both organizations and governments need to be better at helping families combine their work and care responsibilities. The mental load overloads women (and some men) particularly at work when they are thinking and worrying about their children's needs.

Workplaces need to improve support for families to lessen the mental load. This may mean more working remotely or concrete programs to support workers' mental loads. This is also likely to improve workers' productivity.

At the same time, governments need to provide better care infrastructure to support families, for example more universal affordable childcare, supports for transitioning children to and from school, and better aged care. This will lessen workers' worries about the experiences of loved ones while they're engaged in paid work.

Ultimately, the mental load is a mental health issue and companies and governments should treat it as such. This will unburden families, and

particularly mothers, from managing the mental load alone.

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