

WHAT IS THE MENTAL LOAD?

The term “mental load” describes all of the thinking, planning, remembering, and keeping track of everything that goes into organizing and managing a family home.

This work is usually invisible and unrecognized, and in heterosexual relationships overwhelmingly falls on women. The owner of the mental load is ultimately responsible for ensuring that everything gets done. This dynamic begins early in relationships, and the amount of work dramatically increases once couples have children.

“My husband feels that everything will be okay because he knows I’m managing everything.”

At work, this role is called a “manager.” They tend to do less execution and more delegation, and are well compensated for this work. But at home, this person is expected to focus on the big picture and *also* to execute as much if not more than their partner.

IMPACT OF MENTAL LOAD

Emotional Labor

This is the work of managing emotionally-charged, sensitive issues for the family, including researching, strategizing around and planning for a child’s health or learning issues. Carrying the emotional load alone is stressful and builds resentment in women even faster than carrying the rest of the mental load does.

Professional & Economic

The mental load can hold women back at work because so much of their cognitive space is focused on running the household. Women don't become less ambitious in their careers – they simply prioritize the needs of their children. The demands of managing a family greatly reduces the time women spend on activities that lead to leadership roles, including networking after hours and professional development.

Marital Dynamics

If the dynamic emerges where women are responsible for all of the domestic work, and continually give their partners “honey-do” lists, it creates a cycle of passivity, nagging, and anger. If unattended to for too long, women can feel deep despair, overwhelm, fatigue, anger, and alone in their relationships. Over time these relationships can flounder and anger can grow into contempt.

INITIAL STEPS TOWARDS EQUITY

Men

Stop "helping" and start "owning". Saying you want to "help" implies that the person you're helping is responsible for the tasks getting done, and you are stepping in to offer assistance. Instead, identify entire areas of work that you can own, such as the laundry, paying the bills, house straightening, etc.

Women

Stop taking everything on, and let go of ownership and being the one ultimately responsible. This means absolving yourself of the thinking and planning, and also accepting the methods and judgment choices of other family members. Redirect some energy towards self-care and your own development— you will achieve more while showing your children that women can make themselves a priority.

EXERCISES FOR COUPLES

These exercises are intended for couples to create a shared understanding of what the mental load is, and how it affects women, men, and marriages. These activities improve communication, reduce frustration, build equity, and increase appreciation and gratitude.

For effective conversations:

1. Really listen without interrupting, blaming or becoming defensive
2. Use "I statements" to talk about your own perspective and feelings, not your partner's behavior
3. Take a short break if things get too heated emotionally, and take some time to cool down
4. Add any other ground rules that make sense for you as a couple

Exercise #1: The Big Picture- Our Phase of Life

Goals:

1. Couples will move away from viewing each other as the problem.
2. Unite with your partner to become a team that is allied against the problem, which is your current phase of life.

Make a list of high-level responsibilities you have in this phase of life, such as parenting, managing finances, marriage, self-care, running the home, friendships, and caring for aging parents.

Discuss:

1. How do you feel about things in general right now?
2. Which category brings you satisfaction?
3. Which one is most stressful?
4. In which areas do you feel: joyful, hopeful, overwhelmed, frustrated?
5. Where could you make improvements that would lower your stress?
6. Where do you need to redefine more realistic expectations?
7. Next discuss and normalize that this is a challenging phase of life and that's to be expected and it's OK.
8. End by stating 3 things you feel grateful for.

Exercise #2: Understanding the Mental Load

Goal:

Partners will develop a common understanding of the mental load, and how it impacts women and men differently.

Topics for discussion:

1. What is the mental load?
2. How much of the mental load do you each carry?
3. How is the mental load affecting each of you in terms of: career, emotional labor, and your marriage?
4. What is one change you could each make to improve your relationship?
5. End by stating three things you appreciate about your partner.

ABOUT EPICYCLE

Interested in doing deeper work around the mental load?

Sasha McDowell is a career, leadership and business coach, and she facilitates in-depth, structured discussions with couples, designed to help partners successfully navigate the childrearing years by improving communication and teamwork, reducing tension, and creating more equitable and joyful relationships.

To schedule an informational consultation, contact Sasha at sasha@epicyclegroup.com, or learn more about our services at EpicycleGroup.com.