

PARENTAL BURNOUT

By: Jessica Grose - New York Times/Parenting

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- Both working and stay-at-home parents can suffer from parental burnout. Working parents are more at risk for parental burnout if their workplace is inflexible.
- The signs of parental burnout are overwhelming exhaustion, emotional detachment from one's children, loss of effectiveness and pleasure in the parental role, and a marked change in behavior towards one's children.
- To combat parental burnout, let go of the ideal of the perfect parent and try to ask for practical help from other parents (farming out carpooling when possible) or from your partner (dividing household chores more equally) when possible or from experts (psychologists, family therapists)

I discovered that the burnout you feel as a parent and the burnout you feel at work are two separate phenomena with similar symptoms. "You can be totally detached from your children and be well-functioning at work," said Dr. Isabelle Roskam, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium, who researches parental burnout. "And you can be totally overwhelmed and super stressed at work to the extent that you are rude or detached from clients and still be happy to go back home and take care of your children." However, if either kind of burnout is ignored, it can infect everything, so it's important to address the issue before it becomes systemic. We spoke to a clinical psychologist and three academics who study burnout; they gave us recommendations for diagnosing and repairing burnout in all parts of your life.



In their research, Dr. Roskam and her colleague Dr. Moïra Mikolajczak, Ph.D., a fellow psychology professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain, found that the amount of time people spent working didn't affect how burnt out they felt at home, but the amount of flexibility at work did matter. Work itself isn't the problem, said Dr. Roskam, it's reconciling your work life with your family life.

Burning out is a process. "You don't burn out overnight," said Dr. Roskam. Fatigue and increased irritability, she said, are early indicators. Parents need each of the following four symptoms to get a clear diagnosis of burnout, Dr. Roskam and Dr. Mikolajczak concluded:

1. Overwhelming exhaustion. "Typically, they report that they feel so drained that merely thinking of what they need to do for their children is exhausting," said Dr. Roskam. "They have zero energy and don't want to wake up."
2. Emotional detachment from children. This is a consequence of their exhaustion, as parents pull back from managing their children's day-to-day well-being and education. They can even have trouble showing their children how much they love them.
3. Loss of productivity and pleasure in their parental role. They can no longer perform their usual parenting-related tasks and wish they could be something other than a parent.
4. Change in behavior. The exhaustion, detachment and loss of efficacy constitute a marked shift in the way a mother or father acts towards their children. If parents experienced these feelings from the beginning, the diagnosis wouldn't be burnout. It's the contrast that makes the definition.

What to do?

Dr. Inger Burnett-Zeigler, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University finds herself asking clients who are overwhelmed: "Do you actually have to do everything you think you have to do in this moment?" You obviously can't blow off feeding your family every day. But you don't have to have every dish cleaned or create the perfect homemade Halloween costume for your child. "If you don't finish all the dishes and take 20 minutes to yourself that are pleasurable or enjoyable, where you can sit and read or relax," said Dr. Burnett-Zeigler, "that's a better use of your time."