

RELEASING THE MOTHER LOAD

**HOW TO CARRY LESS AND
ENJOY MOTHERHOOD MORE**

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INTRODUCTION

The day my volcano of mom rage erupted was the day that changed my entire approach to motherhood.

I was on my third maternity leave, home with my three sons—eight weeks old, just under two, and three and a half. As you can imagine, life was generally chaotic at best.

But the chaos I was experiencing went beyond the stress of herding three little boys. I wasn't just frazzled—I had lost myself.

I woke up every morning feeling irritated, as if I had already hit my limit for the day before I poured my coffee. I felt like I was drowning. The experience of motherhood wasn't the happy, joyous, greeting-card image I had imagined. It was a constant struggle.

But I was determined not to let that show. I wouldn't admit it to myself, let alone anybody else. Instead, I picked myself up every morning, committed to plow through the discomfort—the *pain* I was feeling—with a stiff upper lip. Whenever I would wonder why I found it so difficult, I told myself that I needed to suck it up. This is what motherhood was. Diapers and spit-up and tantrums and stress. I'd signed up for it. I had no right to question it.

Then one morning, it all came crashing down. It was one of those mornings where everything went wrong. Getting three kids out the door is never easy. Inevitably, somebody spills their milk, can't find their shoes, or melts down. But this was a Stroller Fit Boot Camp day—a fitness class for new moms I attended every week. And I desperately needed to get there—it was the one thing that was giving me a sense of normalcy.

I juggled bags and car seats and blankets and corralled the boys out the door to the van. Just as I hit the button to open the door, I heard a snap. The pulley system on the van broke.

The stress started to bubble up, but I pushed it back down. I refused to let this derail my day. I got everyone buckled in, manually closed the door, and pulled out.

In less than a minute, I saw red and blue lights in my mirror. I groaned as I pulled over, working to push down that stress again. I ignored the screams and cries coming from the back seat and tried to be polite as I rolled down my window.

The officer ticketed me for speeding—I'd hit a speed trap and hadn't adjusted in time. But he also wanted to know why I wasn't wearing glasses. I explained that I'd had LASIK but never updated my information. He decided to ticket me for "misrepresenting my license."

The anger started to bubble back up—only this time it was different. This time, I couldn't hold it down.

I snapped at the officer, took my tickets, and managed to contain my rage until I drove back home and pulled into the driveway.

I opened the car door and collapsed, sobbing in a fit of rage, to the point of vomiting.

And, as I felt the volcano bubble over, as I felt myself collapsing and hyperventilating hysterically, I realized that I was not okay. I couldn't keep pretending that I was.

I ended up being diagnosed with postpartum depression and started a journey to recovery. But I also realized that what I was striving for—this image of the perfect mom—was unattainable.

I was shooting for a dangerous bullseye—the *perfect* mom. I thought that I was just not measuring up. And I believed that if I admitted that I couldn't handle it, I was admitting that I had failed at the most important job in my life. But I hadn't failed. The perfect mother myth had failed me. It had told me that I needed to strive for something false, something entirely unrealistic. It wasn't until I broke out of that mindset that I truly started to experience joy in motherhood.

After I had my breakdown-turned-breakthrough, I realized that not only is perfect not real—it's smothering. It's unattainable. And it doesn't reward you. As I broke away from that perfect mother myth, I was able to see motherhood in an entirely new way. I started to get curious about

why I felt this need to strive for perfection. Where did these beliefs come from? Whose voice was sounding in my head? How had I been led so far astray? Where was I even trying to go?

The more I looked beneath the surface, the more I saw that the construct of motherhood had kept me from being the mom I truly wanted to be. I'd been conditioned to believe that I had to be all the things—the nurturer, the teacher, the schedule tracker, the memory maker, the keeper of the house, on and on and on. A rulebook of motherhood had been handed to me without me realizing it. And that rulebook came with an invisible load—a world of mental and physical tasks that kept me pushing toward perfection while barely being able to breathe.

But I wasn't the only mom that inherited this rulebook. Motherhood researchers have deemed this the era of intensive mothering—an approach to motherhood that is so all-consuming that mothers' identities don't make it out alive. The more we feel we should be present, “on,” and centered around our children, the more we take on physically, cognitively, and emotionally.¹

THE LOAD MOTHERS CARRY

Research reveals that the myths of intensive mothering and the belief in “the perfect mother” are impacting the mental health of moms. Most moms have internalized the idea that motherhood must involve immense sacrifice, that we shouldn't find fulfillment outside of our roles as mothers, and that we are primarily responsible for our children's well-being. The closer we cling to these ideals, the more likely we are to be dissatisfied in motherhood or to develop depression and anxiety.²

Other studies have shown a correlation between invisible labor in the home and maternal frustration and unhappiness.³ It's no wonder we are struggling. We're being saddled with expectations, pressures, and a never-ending list of cognitive labor as we strive for perfection.

Only after I could see the load was I finally able to break out from under it and become the mother I wanted to be. Not one who checked all the imaginary boxes. Not one who always had it together. Not one who

could “do it all.” But one who was happy—one who actually enjoyed the role. (Although let’s be real—I enjoy some days better than others!)

In discussing the load I carry I want to acknowledge my own privilege. I am a heterosexual middle-class white woman with a partner. The labor that I carry is different than what single moms carry, that moms of color carry, or that LGBTQ+ moms carry. I see and appreciate that others’ loads are disproportionately weighted from the start. Because the Mother Load is different for marginalized moms, moms in poverty, or other groups of mothers, the process for releasing might be different. This book aims to give you the basis for breaking away from overarching beliefs and expectations that impact us all.

We’re at a unique place in the history of motherhood. Moms have an unprecedented amount of knowledge, right at our fingertips. And yet, we are struggling more than ever—battling depression, caving under pressure, and desperately trying to figure out why we aren’t measuring up to the ideals we have in our minds.

As a society, although we still have plenty of gains to make, women have come a long way. But our freedoms haven’t been carried into the home.

On the surface, we might believe that mothers do share in that freedom. They can choose to have children or not have children. They can choose to stay at home or continue their careers. They have gained influence on finances and decisions that impact the family.

But hiding beneath that freedom is the Mother Load—the invisible tasks that we, as a society, believe that “good moms” do.

HELPING MOMS FEEL SEEN

Before I experienced my breakthrough, I had over seven years of post-graduate education and years of training and experience as a registered psychotherapist under my belt. And yet, postpartum depression, the “perfect mother” myth, and the invisible load snuck up on me. So if I, with all of my expertise, didn’t see it coming, it’s no surprise that so many other moms don’t either.

When I returned to work after maternity leave, I was dedicated to helping moms feel seen and understood in a way that I wish I would

have felt. I began specializing in maternal mental health, seeking additional training, including the Perinatal Mental Health Certification (PMH-C) with Postpartum Support International and many others. Now with more than a decade of experience as a therapist and creating psychoeducational content that has been shared by celebrities such as Snoop Dogg and Ashley Graham, I have built a business with one mission in mind—changing the way moms are supported.

In Momwell, my fast-growing and sought-after maternal mental health platform, my clients often express to me that they feel trapped by motherhood, that they experience identity loss, and that they are constantly scrambling, trying to keep up with everything they have to do. When I started speaking out about the invisible load on Instagram, mothers latched onto it. My posts about the mental labor we carry receive more engagement than any of my other content and have reached millions. Moms resonate with this load—even if they don't understand that they're carrying it.

It isn't just that they feel pressured to wash the dishes, vacuum the floors, and fold the laundry. The hidden Mother Load goes beyond these physical household tasks.

It's the invisible care work that exists underneath that labor. Soothing babies. Navigating tantrums. Keeping track of where everything is in the house. Scheduling and remembering appointments. Knowing when new clothes, diapers, wipes, and shoes are needed. Researching nap schedules and milestones and how to respond to children in a firm but gentle way. Creating activities that stimulate and educate our children. Playing Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy and Santa. Remembering that one of the kids needs their special teddy bear to sleep, one needs three kisses on the forehead, and the other needs to be tucked in like a burrito.

Moms are the ones carrying most of that unseen labor, starting as early as before conception and continuing even as their children become adults.⁴ But because they are under so much pressure to become “perfect moms,” they often can't even see the load, much less go about releasing it.

Instead, they continue feeling exhausted, struggling to get it all done, and beating themselves up for falling short.

MOMS IN CRISIS

Moms are in crisis—now more than ever.

The pandemic brought a new level of invisible labor into homes. In addition to the unseen labor we were already carrying, we were suddenly navigating making new decisions about our children's health, worrying about protecting them, managing virtual and home school, choosing whether to send them back, putting our lives on hold during quarantine, and worrying about the impact the pandemic will have on our children. (Not to mention other topical emotional burdens—moms are now explaining to their children why they must do active shooter drills and helping them overcome their anxiety. Black mothers are worrying about their children's very existence, scared they will be targeted or that their life is at risk due to the color of their skin.)

Moms were more than twice as likely to report taking on a great deal of childcare labor in the wake of the pandemic than dads. Working moms were more likely to face barriers at work because of family responsibilities, find difficulty balancing work and parenting, and have work interrupted because of childcare than working dads.⁵

Moms also began exiting the workforce in massive numbers, often citing childcare as the primary reason.⁶ The Mother Load isn't just stressing moms out—it has real, tangible impact on their mental health, their well-being, and their career trajectory. Mothers who want to remain in their careers are resigning due to the lack of flexibility in the workplace and the cost of childcare. Mothers who want to be home are being forced to work to help provide necessities for their families due to stagnant wages, the cost of living, and inflation. Economics and finances often dictate these "choices" for us, leaving us pinned into a decision one way or another, regardless of personal preference. Moms are all working, all carrying out the brunt of the load, and often struggling because of it.

The pandemic impacted home dynamics as well. Mothers were 42 percent more likely to have increased their time spent at home with their children during the pandemic than dads, and they were also more likely to experience frustration with their children and dissatisfaction with their relationships due to a lack of support.⁷

Maternal mental health has suffered from the pandemic. The rates of postpartum depression and anxiety have almost tripled since 2020.⁸ Moms of color are at particular risk—they are up to twice as likely to develop symptoms of postpartum depression or anxiety than white moms, but significantly less likely to receive care for their mental health.⁹

Furthermore, mom rage (anger or irritability experienced by moms, which is often uncharacteristic, intense, and overwhelming) has also increased since the onset of the pandemic.¹⁰ It's important to understand mom rage, why it happens, and why it's increasing. While all people experience anger in some capacity, maternal anger is unique. It is often fueled by burnout, mental health concerns, societal pressure, and a lack of support for moms. But due to the societal norms placed on mothers, it also comes with a deep sense of shame. Mothers are expected to be joyful, loving, patient, and kind. There isn't room in this romanticized ideal for irritability or rage. This disconnect between expectations and the reality of human emotions can leave us feeling as if we are failing in the motherhood role. We're putting moms between a rock and a hard place—expecting them to carry the invisible load alone, pull extra weight since the onset of the pandemic, and do it without struggling with their emotions or showing any signs of struggle.

Two things are clear—that the invisible load contributes to mental health concerns for moms and that the load is ever-increasing, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

But this isn't the way it has to be.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR? AN INCLUSIVE LOOK AT THE MOTHER LOAD

As we move forward in this book, I will be addressing motherhood as a construct, but it is important to remember that I am referring to a Western, often heteronormative ideology. There are many ways to mother, which look different based on geographical locations; cultural beliefs and traditions; family size and dynamics; and many other factors. And while all parents carry an invisible load, the Mother Load centered in this book stems from a specific parenting ideology, known as “intensive

mothering,” which we will dive deeper into in chapter 2. This ideology has become prevalent for moms in Western cultures. Of course, even the terms “Western moms” or “Western cultures” encompass a wide range of cultural beliefs, religious and racial makeups, and individual family dynamics. But research has shown that intensive mothering culture transcends individual cultural dynamics. Mothers in Western cultures often carry the beliefs of intensive mothering, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, relationship status, years in the relationship, number of children, or job status of the mother.¹¹

To moms who are single or who are solo parenting right now for any number of reasons—I see you. These statistics referenced in this book often mention “dads” because these studies were centered around two-parent homes in different-sex relationships. But this book is *not* solely for heterosexual partnered moms. In fact, the lessons in this book are built on universal skills and can help *anyone* learn to break away from expectations and traditional roles often carried out in the home. However, our work here is mom-centered and framed in the context of motherhood.

There will also likely be people reading this book who are not in heteronormative relationships. It’s important to note that even in non-heteronormative relationships, these dynamics can still play a role. Partners often fall into traditional “masculine” or “feminine” roles, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. However, the distribution of labor between same-sex partners is statistically shared more evenly.¹²

There are likely several factors that play into this—including an openness to discussing gender and roles, and the very fact that gender isn’t available as an automatic default for distribution. The studies referenced here did focus on different-sex couples, and it’s important to acknowledge that. I value inclusivity, and I believe that moms can break away from female-coded roles formed by gender norms, whether they are in different-sex partnerships, same-sex partnerships, or single or solo parents.

I also know that many of you who are swarmed with this labor do not have a partner to share in this load. You’re still in the right place. Throughout this book, we will use the word “partner” at times. This might be a romantic partner, whether they are the same sex or a different

sex. But “partner” doesn’t have to refer to a romantic relationship. This could be a support partner, a family member, or even a friend—anybody you can lean on to help share the load. Whether you have a romantic partner or the partner you are with is unwilling to share the load, you can still benefit from this book and learn to release the load. In fact, the bulk of this book is intended to be individual work.

If you do have a partner who is unwilling, and if you are trying harder to change someone than they are trying to change themselves, perhaps your relationship needs some support that goes beyond the invisible load and would benefit from couples therapy while you shift your focus to your own needs, mental health, and well-being.

In any case, much of this work is internal. There are skills and tools throughout this book that can be used with a partner to help communicate and share the load. However, the *real* work comes from reshaping our own internalized ideals, expectations, and beliefs around motherhood.

HOW TO RELEASE THE MOTHER LOAD

Motherhood doesn’t have to mean being the only one your children need. It doesn’t have to mean managing and scheduling and shopping and answering questions and remembering everything. It doesn’t have to mean being the default parent for school phone calls and permission slips and haircuts and nail clipping.

It is possible to release the load, but the process of doing that goes beyond what we might think. It’s not enough to try to divvy out tasks between you and your partner or your support system. It’s not enough to just ask for help. The real glue that keeps you stuck in the Mother Load isn’t outside of yourself—it’s rooted deep in your beliefs.

That rulebook that I had been given—that all of us have been given—shapes the way we approach our roles as mothers.

Intensive mothering hasn’t always been the norm. But in the mid-twentieth century, a shift happened.¹³ Most of us can see this development in our own family lines. Our grandmothers were conditioned not to overindulge their children—to stick to schedules and rules and strict discipline. Even rocking and cuddling children to sleep was

considered unusual. Now, we're told the opposite—we should respond to every need our children have, even if it interferes with our own. We must be responsive, nurturing, and gentle. But we must also guide and teach our children, fulfilling all their mental, physical, and emotional needs. We have to do it all, and do it perfectly.

If we believe that the perfect mother must sacrifice her own needs for her family's, find fulfillment only in motherhood, be “on” all the time, and act as the joyous, nurturing caregiver in the home, we cannot break out of the patterns that lead us to carry the invisible labor. While those beliefs remain in place, they act as a barrier for true redistribution and equality in the home. Those beliefs keep the invisible load intertwined with our identities—without breaking out of them, we will resist letting go and slip back into old patterns even if we try to share the load with others.

Step 1: Challenging Our Own Beliefs

In the first section of this book, we're going to dive deep into those beliefs—where they come from, the ways they appear, and how to break out of them. I will show you how to sort through those messages, toss out the harmful ones you have been given, and discover your own personal values (not the values given to you by someone else, but the principles that align with who you are as an individual). Those values will become your north star that guides you through the process of releasing the pieces of the Mother Load that don't align with what truly matters to you.

Step 2: Making the Mother Load Visible

After laying that foundation and establishing the values that will guide you through the process, we'll move into a deeper look into the Mother Load itself. Before we can release the Mother Load, we have to make it visible. We know we're exhausted, but we don't understand why until we experience an Aha Mom-ent that allows us to see the labor beneath the tip of the iceberg. And, in order to make that labor visible to our partners and potentially redistribute it, we must first make it visible to ourselves.