



Supporting shattered mums & dads with nutritional therapy

It's all too common for parents to feel exhausted whilst trying their best to be the perfect mum or dad. Mum-of-two **Catherine Morgan** signed up to a new course in search of her own waning mojo

cannot describe the true exhaustion that I feel as a mum," says Emma, a working mum-of-one. "I have never experienced anything like this and I did nightshifts, on calls, and worked [as a midwife] for 27 hours in a row."

Emma's experience may sound extreme, but she isn't alone. I have had enough 'I'm so tired' conversations with too many mums to know that parental exhaustion is a very real issue. So when Emma says

that, sometimes, going to work makes for a far easier day than being at home, I nod in agreement. Modern parenting, it seems, is taking its toll.

Understanding the cause

Research on parental exhaustion was once exclusively concerned with parents of sick children. But now, there is growing interest in parental burnout within families of healthy children as well. Last year, a Belgian study published in *Frontiers in*

Psychology reported on the experiences of five exhausted mothers.¹ The women were all aged 30 to 42 and had two children; two worked full-time, one worked part-time, one had stopped working, and the other was on sick leave.

For these mums, exhaustion was found to be "rooted in a tendency to over-invest one's parental role, with a desire to be perfect and an overwhelming sense of responsibility for one's children's future, which would leave no respite".

These mothers went from being happily and deliberately over involved, to being overwhelmed by the perceived pressure that was being put on them, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion. They were unable to maintain their responsibilities toward household chores or their children and, as well as emotionally distancing themselves from their children, they sometimes lost control with them — further adding to their distress. Senses of guilt, shame and loneliness were central to their experience of exhaustion, whilst fear

TOP TIPS FOR POOPED PARENTS

Jeans offers many tips on her course to help improve energy levels; here are her top five:

- Base your meals around protein: protein is broken down slowly by your body, and provides a more sustainable form of energy. At each meal, include a good handful of meat, fish, eggs, cottage cheese, plain natural yoghurt, beans, pulses or tofu.
- Reduce your sugar intake... if you include more protein in your diet, this will make it much easier to reduce your sugar intake, because you'll experience fewer cravings. After a few days with higher protein, you can then work on reducing your sugar intake from biscuits, cakes, sweets and chocolate.
- Take some time out to breathe... when we're stressed, we can feel like we're constantly busy but never actually getting anything done. All of us can take just a few minutes in the morning and evening to do some deep breaths. Take three long deep breaths before you do anything in the morning, and three deep breaths before you go to bed.
- Start a bedtime routine: not just for children, a bedtime routine is helpful for adults too. Make sure all lights are low an hour before you go to bed, and wind down with a bubble bath with Epsom salts, listen to some of your favourite music, do some gentle stretching and try a meditation before bed — whatever you need to get your body ready to sleep.
- Make your to-do list achievable. You may have a lot to do, but if you're stressing about things that don't really need to be done, you'll always feel like you're chasing your tail and never have time to switch off. Separate your to-do list into smaller lists of 'urgent and important', which must be done today, and 'important but not urgent', which are things that can wait.

Jeans is unwavering in her recommendation to practise 10 minutes relaxation, daily “no matter what”; this can mean taking a bath, a gentle walk, painting, reading a magazine, sitting with nature, meditation...

of not being a “good enough mother” was a catalyst for the experience of maternal burn-out.

A consequence of modern parenting?

There is no doubt that mums and dads face immense pressure these days — to be the best parent, a good employee, a great partner. For many mums, in particular, there is also the pressure to have a career, to keep the house tidy, and to look good. We are (often) expected to provide home-cooked meals, to do school pick-ups, to attend meetings, to play, to teach, to be ever present. And somewhere along the way, in the midst of all the chaos and expectation, we forget about ourselves.

Social media has no doubt contributed to this unattainable desire to be perfect, but society has changed too. Mums commonly go back to work, and many parents no longer have the traditional family support network nearby. Is it any wonder we're all so exhausted?

It's a problem that registered nutritional therapist Catherine Jeans sees in her clinical practice. “There simply aren't enough hours in the day for what many mums are trying to achieve,” she says. “And this means they don't get enough sleep, they don't have time for exercise, relaxation and eating well.”

Jeans points out that whilst mums are often very good at making sure their children have a snack and a drink to go out the door with, they often neglect themselves, sometimes going all day without eating much at all.

“Everything goes into taking care of our kids, and often we don't remember to keep a little bit back for ourselves,” she says. “Sometimes it feels self-indulgent to do some yoga, go for a massage, to take time off, or just five minutes to do some deep breathing. All too often we prioritise non-important things, such as keeping the house tidy, over our need to rest.”

Support for mums

Last year, realising there was a growing need for support, and wanting to reach more mums-in-need, Jeans launched a four-week online group coaching programme. The Shattered Mum Recovery Programme is aimed specifically at busy mums who want more energy and help dealing with stress and feeling overwhelmed. It's not about quick fixes,

she says, but rather about transforming the way mums think about food, their lifestyle, sleep, stress, and looking after themselves long-term.

So, with the hope of regaining some of my own pre-children vitality, I signed up to the programme, joining nine other shattered mums for a series of six one-hour online lectures. Each session covered a different topic such as: major energy-robbars (e.g. stress, sugar, skipping meals, insufficient protein); the importance of blood sugar control; the role of hormones and the adrenal glands; meal planning; and simple dietary and lifestyle changes for better energy (protein, deep breathing, sleep, relaxation). We also connected via a Facebook group to support and motivate each other.

Despite being trained in nutrition, there was certainly room for improvement with myself, and I too needed to be reminded of the importance of self-care. Jeans is unwavering in her recommendation to practise 10 minutes relaxation, daily “no matter what”; this can mean taking a bath, a gentle walk, painting, reading a magazine, sitting with nature, meditation...

There was another simple idea that really stuck, too: ask yourself, what can you add to meals to make them even better? Now, whenever I am preparing a meal, this is exactly my thought — what can I add?... whether it's more veggies into a bolognese sauce, ground almonds into a curry, seeds onto a salad, chicken into a ready-made soup, or spinach into scrambled egg.

There is also something to be said about the community environment, too. Having a support network of like-minded people can really help motivate and inspire. And it's good to know that you're not alone.

We might strive for perfection but, ultimately, what is that really? Social media might tell us one thing and real mums might tell us something else.

If you are feeling burnt out as a parent, there is no shame in asking for help. But let go of expectations, too. The stresses will always be there, whether your children are babies, toddlers, teenagers, or even adults. So we need to invest in ourselves in order to be the best parent we can be.

Reference:

1. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6028779

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