

How to Navigate Being the Designated Worrier

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Earlier this year, I went on a writing retreat. I love this retreat center in particular because it's like an all-inclusive resort. They have a bell, and it rings four times a day. It rings at seven in the morning to wake you up. That's when you get up and get dressed. Then it rings again, half an hour later, when it's time for breakfast. You leave the lodge and walk down to the dining hall, where they serve you a delicious breakfast, after which they take your dishes away and wash them.

Meanwhile, you go to one of many lovely places around the retreat center, and you write. And then, at noon, the bell rings again. Lunchtime. And then you write some more. And at this point, you can guess what happens: The bell rings once more at dinnertime. Once again, you write until you are sleepy. And then you go to bed, and you sleep peacefully surrounded by the sounds of the mountaintop. In the morning, it starts over again. You don't even need to set an alarm clock.

Why, for me as a woman with two small children, a husband and a household I run, would this retreat center in particular be so appealing?

Designated Worrier

There's been a lot of talk over the past few years about the mental load women bear, even in households that supposedly divide chores 50-50 between husbands and wives. (Caveat: I'm focusing on heteronormative relationships here because those have been the focus in the research. However, much of this applies to other relationships as well.)

In 2015, Judith Shulevitz published a column in *The New York Times* titled "Mom: The Designated Worrier," in which she wrote, "Sociologists sometimes call the management of familial duties 'worry work,' and the person who does it the 'designated worrier,' because you need large reserves of emotional energy to stay on top of it all." That sentence resonated deeply with me. It is so hard for me to get my work done when I have to delegate so much of my brain space to worrying about whether the dentist appointments have been made, who is going to meet the kids after school, whether my younger son is behaving during his piano lesson, whether my older son remembered his swim goggles at team practice and a whole host of other things.

The worry, the mental load I bear, never ends. Ever. There are just too many vital details to manage for my children and household. How I manage to even write this column every month seems like a miracle to me.

Mental Labor

The topic of women's mental load is a perennial one. In 2017, Gemma Hartley wrote a piece for *Harper's Bazaar* titled "Women Aren't Nags—We're Just Fed Up."

In it, she discussed trying to approach the discussion of what she calls "emotional labor" (what I prefer to call "mental labor") with her spouse:

Even having a conversation about the imbalance of emotional labor becomes emotional labor. It gets to a point where I have to weigh the benefits of getting my husband to understand my frustration against the compounded emotional labor of doing so in a way that won't end in us fighting.

Instead of getting her husband to understand, she ends up delegating tasks to her husband. She keeps the mental load for herself.

This has been my experience as well. Recently (like, last month), my husband and I had a whammy of a fight when I tried to explain to him—and ask for help with—the mental load I carry.

The Real Problem

I cried as I told him about how much of my brain I have to give over to worry. I told him about how I can't stop. He said, "You could just worry less." And that's when I got angry. Because if I were to worry less, then so many things could go wrong. There is no "worrying less." Someone has to notice if the kids' lunches are packed, if the kids' prescriptions are filled, if the pediatrician appointments are made, or the dentist or the eye doctor. Someone has to notice—that's what it means to worry. I have to do it. I have to give over at least half of my brain to all of this worrying. I am the designated worrier. Because someone has to be.

I don't have an answer to this problem. I only have an observation that it is real and impacts most of the women I know. And I have the evidence of my experience from this spring at the writing retreat, when I went to the place where they ring a bell. Where I didn't have to think about anything but my work. I didn't have to think about food. I didn't have to think about an alarm clock. I didn't have to think about the dishes. I didn't have to think about anything but the work I was working on.

And you know what happened? I started my new novel—and I wrote *five thousand* words a day over six days. That's *thirty thousand words*. When I left and saw that word count, I thought, Imagine. Imagine how much I could do if things were different, if I wasn't the designated worrier and someone else carried the load. Imagine what I could accomplish. So, here's what I can change, though: I can go back to the retreat. That's because women, and others who must bear the mental load in relationships, must deliberately carve out spaces for ourselves so we can work without worry getting in the way. 

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