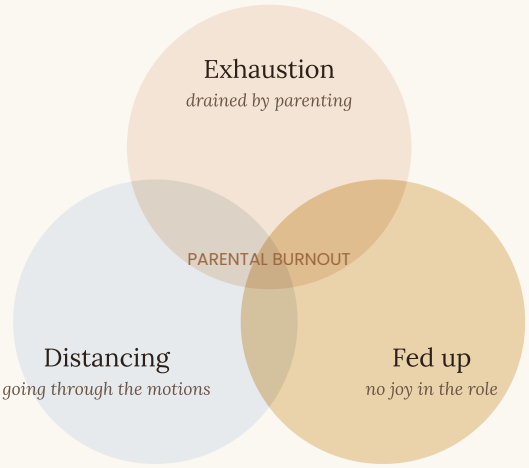
Burnout *in motherhood*

When caring for everyone else leaves nothing for you: understanding parental burnout, and gentle ways to recover.

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Many mothers reach a point where they feel completely empty: exhausted beyond tiredness, snapping at the people they love most, going through the motions, and wondering where the mother they used to be has gone. If this sounds familiar, you may be experiencing **parental burnout**.

Parental burnout is not a sign that you are a bad mother or that you don't love your children. Researchers **Isabelle Roskam** and **Moïra Mikolajczak** have studied it across many countries, and found it develops when the stresses of parenting outweigh the resources available, for long enough. It is often found in parents who care *a great deal*.



Four signs

Roskam and Mikolajczak describe four key signs:

- **Exhaustion** in your role as a parent
- **Emotional distance** from your children, doing the basics but feeling disconnected
- **Feeling fed up** and finding no pleasure in parenting
- A painful **contrast** with the parent you used to be, or wanted to be

Burnout as a mum can feel like...

BODY

- Bone-deep exhaustion
- Touched out
- Getting ill often
- Can't rest even when you can

EMOTIONS

- Rage that scares you
- Numbness, emptiness
- Guilt and shame
- Crying in the car or shower

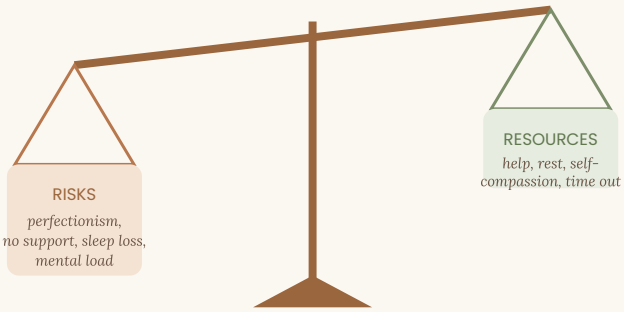
MIND

- "I can't do this anymore"
- Fantasising about escape
- Brain fog
- "I'm failing them"

WITH CHILDREN

- Shouting more
- Going through the motions
- Dreading bedtime or mornings
- Feeling far away

When the scales *tip*



Risks and resources

Roskam and Mikolajczak describe parental burnout as a **balance**. When the risk factors of parenting outweigh the resources, day after day, burnout can develop.

This is helpful, because it shows two ways forward: **reducing the risks**, and **adding resources**.

COMMON RISKS	RESOURCES THAT HELP
Perfectionism and very high standards	Accepting "good enough"
Little practical or emotional support	A partner who shares the load, family, friends, other parents
Carrying most of the mental load	Fair division of thinking work as well as tasks
Sleep deprivation	Protected sleep, shared nights
A child with additional needs, illness or a hard temperament	Specialist support, respite, understanding from others
Money worries, work pressure, juggling	Flexible working, practical help, financial advice
Little time for yourself	Regular, protected time to rest and be you
Self-criticism	Self-compassion

The pressure to be perfect

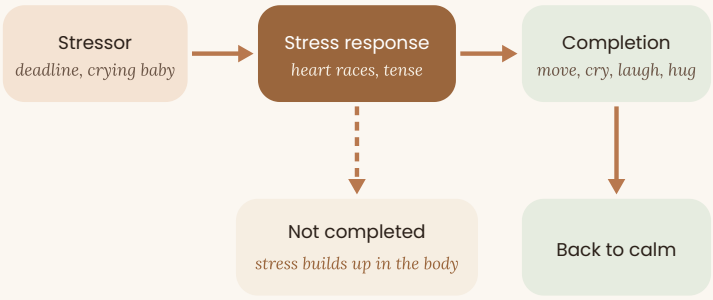
Sociologist **Sharon Hays** described **intensive mothering**: the cultural belief that good mothers must be endlessly selfless, child-centred and emotionally available, and that mothering should be expert-guided and all-consuming. Social media can amplify this. Holding ourselves to an impossible standard is one of the strongest drivers of burnout. **No mother can meet it, because it isn't real.**

Carrying *too much*

The invisible load

Much of what makes motherhood exhausting is invisible: remembering, planning, anticipating, worrying, organising. This **mental load** doesn't stop when the children are asleep, which is why many mothers feel tired even after rest. Sharing tasks isn't enough. The thinking also needs to be shared.

The stress cycle



Emily and Amelia Nagoski explain that the body's stress response needs to be **completed** to return to calm. A crying baby, a toddler meltdown, a rushed school run: each triggers a stress response, and mothers often have no chance to discharge it before the next one comes.

Over months and years, unfinished stress cycles accumulate in the body.

Burnout, depression or both?

Parental burnout is linked to parenting, while depression tends to affect all areas of life. They can overlap. Postnatal depression can happen any time in the first year after birth, and anxiety and low mood can affect mothers at any stage.

PLEASE REACH OUT IF…

- You feel low, hopeless or numb most of the time for more than two weeks
- You have frightening thoughts about harming yourself or your children
- You feel you can't keep your children safe
- You feel your family would be better off without you

Speak to your GP, health visitor or midwife, or call Samaritans on **116 123**. You will not be judged, and reaching out is a sign of strength.

Refilling *your cup*

Completing the stress cycle, mum-style

Movement. Dance in the kitchen with the kids, a pram walk, shaking out your arms after a meltdown.

Breathing. Three slow breaths with long out-breaths before you respond.

Laughter. Silly time with your children, a funny voice note to a friend.

Affection. A 20-second hug with your partner or child.

A good cry. In the shower, in the car, with a friend. Let it come.

Creativity. Colouring with the kids, singing, baking, writing a few lines.

Seven types of rest for mothers

Saundra Dalton-Smith describes seven kinds of rest. Mothers are often missing several at once.

PHYSICAL
Sleep, naps, gentle stretching, a warm bath

MENTAL
Breaks from thinking: short pauses, a walk without your phone

SENSORY
Less noise, light and screens; quiet time

CREATIVE
Nature, art, music: things that inspire awe

EMOTIONAL
Being able to be honest about how you feel

SOCIAL
Time with people who restore rather than drain you

SPIRITUAL
Connection to meaning, purpose or something bigger

MY MISSING REST
Which type do I need most?

Lowering the load

Let go of...

- Homemade everything
- A spotless house
- Saying yes to every invitation and request
- Comparing yourself online
- Doing it all yourself

Ask for...

- Your partner to own whole areas of family life
- Grandparents or friends to take the children for a few hours
- A regular break that is just yours
- Help from your health visitor or GP
- Practical support from local family services

Rebalancing *the scales*

My risks and resources

List what weighs you down and what helps. Then circle one risk to reduce and one resource to add.

WHAT WEIGHS ME DOWN (RISKS)	WHAT HELPS ME (RESOURCES)

My early warning signs

	WHAT I NOTICE
In my body	
In how I am with my children	
In my thoughts	
What my partner or friends notice	

A weekly rest plan

Plan small, protected moments, and who will cover the children.

	REST I WILL TAKE	WHO'S COVERING
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Weekend		

KINDNESS

Good enough *is enough*

Paediatrician **Donald Winnicott** described the **"good enough mother"**: a parent who is loving and responsive most of the time, but not perfect. He believed that small, everyday imperfections actually help children grow, because they learn that relationships can survive disappointment and repair.

WHAT BURNOUT TELLS YOU	A KINDER WAY TO SEE IT
"I'm a terrible mother."	I'm an exhausted mother who loves her children and needs support.
"Other mums cope. Why can't I?"	Many mothers are struggling quietly. I'm seeing others' highlights.
"I should be able to do it all."	No one was ever meant to parent alone.
"If I rest, things will fall apart."	If I don't rest, I will fall apart. Rest is part of caring for my family.
"I shouted again. I've ruined them."	I can say sorry. Repair teaches my children that love survives hard moments.

REFLECTION

1. What would I say to a friend who felt as I do right now?
2. What does my children's happiness really need from me, and what can I let go of?
3. Who could I let in a little more?

YOU MATTER TOO

Looking after yourself isn't selfish. Children learn how to treat themselves by watching how we treat ourselves. A mother who rests, asks for help and is kind to herself is teaching her children that they deserve the same.

FURTHER READING AND SUPPORT

Where to *find more*

Recommended reading

Burnout
Emily & Amelia Nagoski (2019)
The stress cycle and why women burn out, with practical tools.

Fair Play
Eve Rodsky (2019)
A system for sharing the mental load at home.

Good Inside
Dr Becky Kennedy (2022)
Parenting with connection, including caring for your own feelings.

Mom Burnout
Sheryl Ziegler (2018)
A psychologist on why mothers burn out and how to recover.

Sacred Rest
Saundra Dalton-Smith (2017)
The seven types of rest and how to restore them.

Matrescence
Lucy Jones (2023)
How motherhood transforms body, mind and identity.

Useful websites

NHS Every Mind Matters
nhs.uk/every-mind-matters
Self-help for stress, anxiety and low mood.

Home-Start UK
home-start.org.uk
Volunteers who support families with young children at home.

Working Families
workingfamilies.org.uk
Advice on juggling work and family, including flexible working.

Gingerbread
gingerbread.org.uk
Information and community for single-parent families.

Looking after you

If you feel unable to cope, very low, or have thoughts of harming yourself or your children, please speak to your GP, health visitor or midwife today. You will not be judged. Samaritans: **116 123** (free, 24 hours). NHS 111, mental health option. In an emergency, call **999**.

This information sheet offers general support and is **not intended to replace therapy, or medical or professional advice, diagnosis or treatment.** Draws on Roskam & Mikolajczak's research on parental burnout and the balance of risks and resources; Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996); Emily & Amelia Nagoski; Saundra Dalton-Smith; Donald Winnicott. © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.