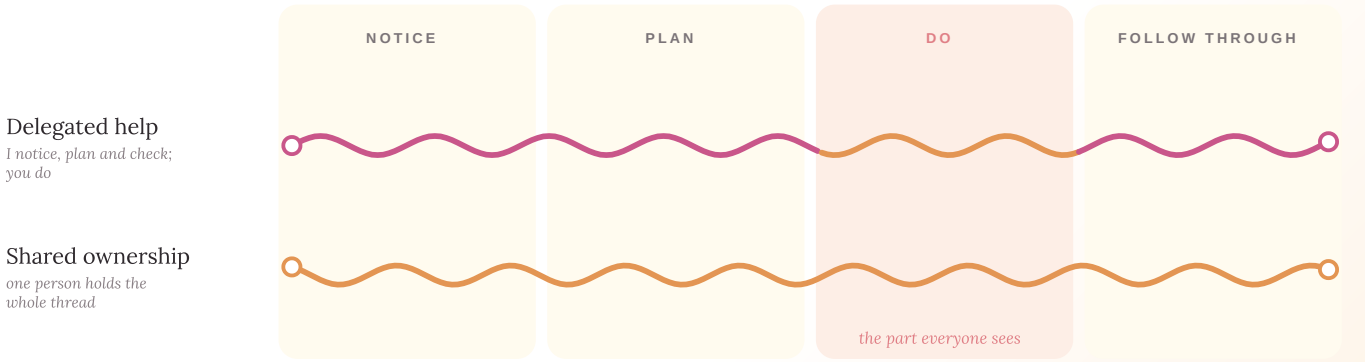
The Mental Load in Relationships

RELATIONSHIPS · INVISIBLE WORK · FAIRNESS

Running a home takes thinking as well as doing: noticing, remembering, planning and checking. This thinking is easy to miss because no one can see it. The real question isn't just who does the chores. It's who makes sure they get done.

TWO WAYS TO SHARE ONE TASK



Doing a task isn't the same as owning it. Owning it means holding the whole thread.

01 The four layers

every task has more than one part

Noticing
Seeing that something needs attention.

the fridge is nearly empty

Planning
Deciding what, when and how.

a meal plan and a shopping list

Doing
The hands-on part of the task.

doing the shopping

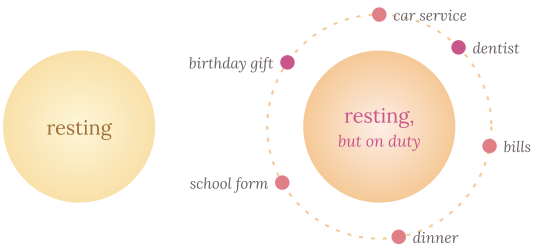
Following through
Checking it's done and fixing what went wrong.

did we get everything?

02 Why it can feel so heavy

seen and unseen

Same sofa, different evening



Both partners may be sitting down. One is resting; the other is still running through tomorrow. Time off tasks isn't always time off responsibility.

Helping, or sharing?

"Helping" can quietly suggest the home belongs to one person. A small change in words can shift the whole conversation.

~~INSTEAD OF~~
~~"I help my partner with the housework."~~

TRY ASKING
"How do we share running our home?"

When the load is uneven, small arguments about dishes or laundry can really be about feeling alone, unseen or unable to rely on each other.

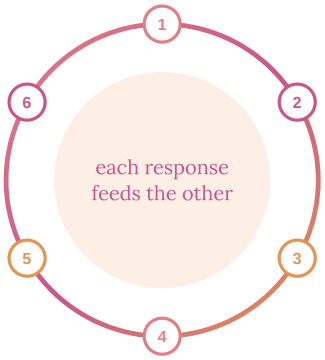
WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Interviews with couples found that the thinking side of housework involves anticipating needs, finding options, deciding and monitoring. It was often invisible to both partners and a common source of conflict (Daminger, 2019). Researchers describe the mental load as invisible, without clear boundaries, and never quite finished, because it spills into work, rest and sleep (Dean et al., 2022).

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03 The over- and under-functioning loop

nobody planned it this way



1. Something needs doing
2. One partner steps in
3. The other steps back
4. The first takes on more
5. The second waits to be asked
6. Both feel unseen

The "manager"
notices, reminds and checks, and can end up feeling like the other's memory.

The "assistant"
waits to be asked, and can feel that nothing they do is enough.

04 A request or an agreement?

clear beats vague

A REQUEST

"Could you sort out the car service?"

Unclear when, who follows up, or what happens if it slips.

AN AGREEMENT

"The car is yours. Booked by the 20th; tell me if that changes."

One owner, a deadline and a plan if things go wrong.

05 Who holds this thread?

circle one in each box

AREA	NOTICING	PLANNING	DOING	FOLLOWING THROUGH
Food and meals	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐
Money and bills	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐
Health and appointments	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐
Children and school	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐
Home and repairs	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐
Family and social plans	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐	○ ○ ◐

○ me ○ my partner ◐ shared

06 One thread to hand over

whole, not in pieces

The area _____

Who will own it from start to finish _____

What "done" looks like _____

We'll check in on _____

Fair isn't always 50/50

Tick what you'll take into account:

- ☐ paid work hours
- ☐ health
- ☐ caring for others
- ☐ busy seasons
- ☐ time to truly rest

A note on safety. These ideas assume both partners are acting in good faith. If a partner uses threats, control or intimidation, this isn't a sharing problem; your safety comes first, and specialist support can help.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

Does the way we share our life let both of us feel supported, and both of us rest?

SOURCES

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