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Get out of the Mental Load Trap
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THE SYMPTOM: TOTAL EXHAUSTION

I was 35 years old and had 1.5 children according to my income tax card. Two of my own and one child that my husband had brought into the marriage. For five years I worked as a project manager for a medium-sized IT service provider. I worked part-time for 30 hours a week, home office was not an issue, I was able to determine the start and end of my working hours flexibly, I almost never had to travel, it was reliably documented, and I had tools at my disposal that enabled me to work independently of time and place. There were no meetings before 10 am and after 4 pm.

Two of my children had a place in a day-care centre that others could only dream of. The day care centre was open from 8 am to 5 pm, there were no holiday closing times, and the children were cared for so lovingly and warmly that they complained almost every day when I picked them up. The oldest child attended a school with after-school care, which was so close that he or she could go home alone.

My husband was a committed father and also helped with the household. On some days he took the children to the kindergarten, one afternoon a week was "Daddy's Day", and if there was something to do, I only had to ask him and it was done at some point. Most of the time anyway.

My mother was blown away. She wasn't that lucky then. My husband even ironed his own shirts! Because I steadfastly refused to do so (in Berlin you can take them to the cleaners for 99 cents a piece), she feared that he would eventually file for divorce.

I had just had 14 months parental leave. Twelve of them alone, two together with my husband. The youngest child

had successfully settled in at kindergarten, and I was looking forward to work. I enjoyed working, I missed my colleagues and my tasks. In fact, I was full of anticipation for the new stage of life. Because after the birth of my first child, my return to work had gone smoothly. I felt very grateful, because I had only heard horror stories from many friends about how they had been bullied out of their jobs after the birth of their first child.

So I started into the new old job life. Even my work trip was short. From door to door it took me less than 30 minutes. All I had to do was take the underground to Alexanderplatz. There I got off, walked past a big cinema and was in my office five minutes later. It irritated me very much that I was regularly tired while I was on the underground. Getting off the train already caused me trouble. I let myself be carried along by the crowds during rush hour and always took the stairs that led me to the cinema. In front of the cinema my legs became like lead. It felt as if I was an astronaut and someone had misconfigured the gravity on my spaceship. I slowed down, stood in front of the cinema, looked up at the facade and thought to myself: "If I lie down on the asphalt here for a moment - just ten minutes - I'll feel better. The grey floor looked strangely inviting. My body felt hot and heavy, and I'm sure it would be very pleasant to rest on the floor for just a few minutes and recharge my batteries. Just for a moment. Maybe until the other commuters had passed me by? Then I would start the working day strengthened and fresh. That's how it went day after day. I never laid down. I already knew that it was not healthy to want to lie down in public. Adults do not lie down in the street.

I had to do something. Somehow relieve myself. So I looked

at my everyday life and stopped all the activities that were not absolutely necessary. No more appointments with girlfriends, not even after daycare for the playground.



I stopped going to crafts afternoons, resigned from my position as a spokeswoman, and when there was a buffet in the school or in the kindergarten, I brought juice or a cake. I always had a bad conscience, but since there was no other way, that was the lesser evil. After about six weeks I was working again. I no longer wanted to lie on the cold floor in front of the cinema and could go to work without incident - but that didn't mean that I regularly fell asleep at 8 pm in my child's warm bed.

Years went by in this way. Years in which I felt powerless and constantly tired. But that seemed normal. Other mothers had that too. The constant exhaustion is part of motherhood, so it seemed logical and quasi natural to me. Mothers who weren't totally flat, mothers whose children slept through, mothers who perhaps only had one frugal child or who had the financial means to relieve themselves, apologised to the mothers who were exhausted. The other mothers were part of a secret society. We understood all too well how well those who could take a shower in peace were doing. Who had 20 minutes just for themselves in the bathroom. Who didn't have a child sitting in the bathtub or knocking on the door because they urgently needed to use the toilet right now.

We assured each other that it was okay to cook noodles with tomato sauce three times a week. You could always prepare an alibi salad with it. Heroines were those who still had time to paint their fingernails or even draw an eyelid line. How did they do that? I did not know. Only years later did I realise what had happened to me.

In 2017 I found an excerpt from the comic strip *The Mental Load* by the French illustrator Emma on the internet. I had never heard this term before. But when I had finished reading the comic, I felt enlightened. That's what had been bothering me all these years. It felt as if the end of a long story of suffering was in sight, as if I had found a doctor who could make a diagnosis. Emma writes in her comic book: "I hope that these pages find their way into your grassroots struggles ... I hope that my social analysis and my pictures will also be of use to you." Her wish has come true, because her comic strip went viral not only in France, but worldwide. It was now clear to me, too: apart from the actual to-dos,

which I worked through every day, the mental load had taken me to the limits of my resilience.

Mental Load - finally the child had a name for me and had become tangible. What I didn't know was that this knowledge would change my life forever, and I'll spoil it for you: for the better ...