

Mother Nurture

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Are You Feeling Depleted?

Before having kids, I had a lot of energy and felt very healthy. But now, with a 4 year old and a baby, I'm run down, I get colds frequently, and my menstrual cycle has gotten more intense. My doctor's sympathetic but says I'm fine. What do you think?

We think you are trying your hardest and that you feel the way you do for very concrete, physical reasons. Understanding them gives you clarity and sends guilt packing. Plus it points you toward effective ways to feel less stressed, stay energetic and healthy, and build teamwork and intimacy with your mate.

Think about it: motherhood is profoundly fulfilling. But it is also the most relentlessly stressful and demanding activity most women – or men! – will ever do.

“The hardest job in the world” gets done day after day for twenty years or more. And it’s all the more demanding the more kids you have, or if any of your children have special needs like a challenging temperament, disability, or health problem.

Some dads are great: they’re engaged with the kids, do their fair share around the house, and are loving with their wife. But let’s face it: many are not. The average mom works about twenty hours a week more than her partner, regardless of whether she’s drawing a paycheck. And if you’re rearing your children essentially alone, as do one in five mothers, you’re getting little to no help from a partner at all.

Plus most mothers are living today in a world that is vastly different from the hunter-gatherer culture that humans are adapted to for raising a family. In a tribal or village setting, a mom’s life moved at the pace of a walk with her children nearby. She was surrounded by other mothers or relatives who could lend a hand with her kids, her stresses were intermittent instead of chronic, and the delicate biological machinery of reproduction wasn’t exposed daily to man-made chemicals. Sure, we’re not proposing a return to the Stone Age, but there is no way around the harsh fact that today’s frantic pace, lack of supportive community, scary culture, need to juggle work and home, toxic pollutants that even appear in breast milk, etc. all wear on a mother’s body and mind.

It all adds up over time. You’re pouring out more and handling more stresses, but taking less in. It's no wonder if you feel used up, emptied out – in a word, DEPLETED. Besides being a psychological experience, depletion occurs in the bodies of many, many mothers. Laboratory tests commonly show that mothers have dangerously low levels of

key nutrients and that important bodily systems (e.g., hormonal, immune, gastrointestinal, nervous) have become disturbed.

As a result of all these factors, scientific studies have found that motherhood (and an increasing number of children) raises a woman's risks for:

- Thyroid disease
- Autoimmune conditions
- Type II diabetes
- Depression
- Gallbladder and kidney disease
- Nutritional deficits
- Intensified PMS
- Fatigue
- Some kinds of cancer
- A shortened lifespan

This is a sobering list of health problems! To be sure: Motherhood is NOT itself a medical issue. But its physical and psychological consequences often impact a woman's mental and physical health, and her marriage – leading to billions of dollars in health care expenses and lost productivity in the country as a whole. Even just everyday experiences of feeling frazzled, weary, irritable, overwhelmed, blue, or let down wear on a mother's well-being and cast a dark cloud over a time that should be so wonderful.

If fatherhood exposed men to similar risks, there'd be a national outcry. But since these involve "just" women, they are taken for granted.

Our society glorifies the wonderful side of motherhood, but it doesn't want to look at the challenges. For example, new moms fall off the radar of the health care system a couple months postpartum – as if bearing and rearing children made no long-term difference. Articles in popular magazines for mothers rarely go beyond chirpy proclamations that all problems can be solved with stuff like low-fat casseroles or clever tricks with a screaming baby. And compared to other Western, industrial nations, America ranks dead last in family leave and other family-friendly policies.

This blind spot – or worse, denial – in our national consciousness makes many moms think that feeling run down must be their own fault in some way. Consequently, they delay (or never do . . .) the self-care, thorough check-ups, or firmly speaking up for themselves with their partner that would reverse the downward slide of depletion.

It's a pity, since there are so many research-proven ways to lower stress, replenish your body, heal the health problems common among mothers, get more help from your mate, and nurture a lasting and loving marriage after children. They're summarized in our book, *Mother Nurture* (endorsed by Christiane Northrup, MD, and other experts on women's health), and we'll also be exploring this territory in future columns.

Meanwhile, you can start feeling better by simply knowing that you are not alone, that objective factors have brought you to this point (not a personal failing!), and that there are plenty of good ways to improve your health, your mood, and your marriage after children. Whether you're feeling just a little bit worn out – or even that you're running on empty – try this simple suggestion: Commit to doing one simple thing for your own health or well-being for three days in a row, and on the third day, decide if you want to keep doing it.

We wish you the best!

(Rick Hanson, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac., is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 13 and 16. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the first and second authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)