

**URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/feb/15/i-didnt-want-to-spend-time-with-my-children-i-was-just-going-through-the-motions-the-pain-of-parental-burnout#:~:text=You%20wake%20each%20morning%20already%20exhausted%20at%20the%20thought%20of,bare%20minimum%20for%20their%20children>**

## **‘I couldn’t be left alone with the kids’: when parental exhaustion tips into burnout**

Most people with small children are worn out – but for some, the pressure of striving to be perfect parents can drive them to the edge

By [Deborah Linton](#)

Sat 15 Feb 2025 06.00 EST

‘I cried like someone had died,’ Rachel Stern says of the day things unravelled at home. ‘I thought: ‘I can’t do this any more.’ I didn’t want to spend time or play with my children. I was just going through the motions.’

It was a Sunday morning in January 2022. Stern’s sons were five and two. She wrote her husband a note – “I just need some space” – asking him to watch them, left their home in Manchester and started walking. “I was inconsolable,” says Stern, now 39. “And it was so shameful to admit that I just couldn’t be with my kids.”

Stern was working condensed, full-time hours in a new job as a brand strategist. The family had moved cities during the pandemic, bought and renovated a house, and her elder had started school four months earlier. She had reached her limit: “I didn’t have the mental capacity to be a mum any more.” She now understands that she was suffering from parental burnout, a syndrome defined by academics as “chronic and overwhelming stress which leads parents to feel exhausted and run down by their role”. At its worst, it can give rise to thoughts of suicide – more so, say researchers, than in cases of job burnout or depression.

In a busy, perfectionist world, in which parents are trying to be the very best at home, at work and within their wider families, the term has gained traction, and is the subject of academic study at the [Parental Burnout Research Lab](#) at the University of Louvain in Belgium. Run by academics Moira Mikolajczak and Isabelle Roskam, the lab has gathered evidence from 30,000 parents worldwide and has created a 23-point questionnaire to help people determine whether their feelings are, overall, balanced or whether there’s cause for

concern. Is parental burnout an inevitable symptom of the impossibility of doing and having it all – or a worrying condition we should be taking more seriously?

---

“In reality, it had been going on a long time,” says Stern, who had “always wanted to be a mum” but found her first maternity leave more challenging than she had imagined. “I found the monotony hard. Among other mums, I was the anomaly, saying, ‘I’m not enjoying this, I want to go back to work.’” She then found the jump to two children “unbelievably hard. I’d wanted to give my son a sibling but I’d be on my own with these children all day while my husband worked, and I dreaded it. I was clock-watching. It was constant: ‘I can’t do this, I can’t cope.’”

After stepping out of her front door that Sunday morning, she walked the streets for a while before ending up at her parents’ house. She saw a GP, followed by a psychologist, who diagnosed acute stress. She took nine months off work. “My husband had always been hands-on but he picked up more. He did bath and bedtimes or our parents helped. I couldn’t be left alone with the kids, not because anyone feared for their safety; they feared what it would do to me.”

Through reading books, researching online what she was feeling and listening to podcasts during that time, she stumbled across the term “parental burnout”. “It was a lightbulb moment,” she says.

*It’s an intensity of overwhelming exhaustion far beyond anything you’ve imagined. You wake each morning already exhausted*

The term was conceptualised by Roskam and Mikolajczak. Roskam, who herself has five children, noticed a pattern in her clients. “I saw parents coming to a consultation talking about themselves, how they were suffering. Moira wondered: ‘Is there something similar to burnout, but in parents?’” Academically, the term emerged in the 1980s but had only ever been considered in families with severely ill or disabled children. But the pair’s research has found it to be more widespread. Their diagnostic test includes practical questions about whether parents feel they have anyone to share the load with, as well as emotional ones about how much they feel able to handle stress. “We applied a scale, like in job burnout, changing the features to parenting situations.”

The syndrome presents as extreme exhaustion and emotional distancing. Roskam describes a “cold parenting, autopilot mode”; a feeling of no longer wanting to parent or getting pleasure from it; and, critically, a sense of not measuring up to the parent they want to be, leading to intense feelings of shame and guilt.

Is this different from the everyday fatigue of raising children? Yes, Roskam says. “Every parent feels exhausted at the end of the day, whether you have a lot of children or your children are young; and every parent feels happy once they’re in their beds at night and you have some time for you. But if the next day you wake up with your energy replenished and you are able to see your children and be involved in parenting them again, you are not in burnout. You are, though, if, even with a long and good night’s sleep, you are not able to recover or feel good in your parenting role. It’s not a normal exhaustion but an intensity of overwhelming exhaustion far beyond anything you’ve imagined. You wake each morning already exhausted at the thought of what to do for or with the children.” Parents who are in burnout will also feel they have lost direction, can no longer stand their “mum” or “dad” role and are only able to do the bare minimum for their children.

By 2020, Roskam and Mikolajczak had worked with 100 researchers in 40 countries to understand the phenomenon, which is still not taken seriously by some health agencies. While the charity [Action for Children recognises and offers advice on parental burnout](#), the [World Health Organization categorises burnout as a work-related phenomenon](#), not a parenting syndrome. The NHS, meanwhile, shares advice on occupational burnout but doesn’t have a page for either that or parental burnout in its A-Z of conditions.

The researchers attribute the cause of this particular burnout to a gap between a parent’s resources (family or peer support, health and finances) and the level of demands (number of children, presence, support and relationship with a co-parent, and expectations). They say it’s most prevalent in individualistic societies – Poland, Belgium, the US and Canada among them – where a high value is placed on personal achievement, perfectionism and self-reliance. (The institute does not yet have a research group in the UK.)

“In these countries, it’s not enough to be a good mother or father, you have to be the *best*,” Roskam says. “It creates discrepancies between the mother you should be and the mother you are, and that’s exhausting.” They have found the prevalence of parental burnout to be lowest in countries including Cameroon, Thailand, Vietnam and Cuba where traditional family bonds are valued and the parental load is more likely to be shared.



[View image in](#)

[fullscreen](#)

‘If the rhetoric is, yeah, parenting’s hard, then people who are suffering feel they can’t speak up.’ Photograph: Lydia Goldblatt/The Guardian

It’s not about wealth, Roskam says. “Low- or middle-income families may have different stressors to one another but it’s the balance [between those resources and demands] that matters.” For example, their research found single parenthood to be a vulnerability factor in Iran, meaning it was more likely to contribute to burnout, but not in Belgium or France where there was more widespread cultural acceptance of single-parent families. And while it may be harder for a single parent or low earner to get a babysitter or go to a restaurant to compensate for stress, a higher-earning parent dealing with poor family or spousal support, bad health or a schedule overloaded in pursuit of perfectionism can also unravel. “The way to prevent and treat burnout is to adjust the balance,” Roskam says.

---

For real-estate agent Alyssa Soto, 47, in Milwaukee, US, it was a compliment from a well-meaning relative that helped her realise she was experiencing burnout. “I remember her saying, ‘Your house is so clean, I could eat off the floor.’ I look back and think: how was I doing this, where was I finding the time? I was working full-time, making dinners and lunches, picking up and dropping off at school, and studying for my real-estate licence. I went to bed late, got up at 5.30am and started again. It was tedious.”

Divorced, and with her children then aged 11 and eight, she hit burnout. “My work and home self were separate entities,” Soto says. She had energy for work but not her children. “I fought myself, because how could I feel that way about looking after my children who I worked so hard for?”

It was years later that Soto would come across the term parental burnout and recognise her experience. At the time, she felt she had hit rock bottom, so forced herself to make changes. “I taught the kids to do more for themselves – house tasks, help with our dogs, cleaning the yard – and involved their friends’ parents more in picking them up. I realised I didn’t have to do things at 110% to be a good mom. The kids responded just fine.”

The syndrome may be a relatively new label but it is not a new experience. “Parental burnout existed before but people were not interested,” Roskam says. Stories of mothers reaching breaking point or even walking out on their families have circulated for decades without their underlying reasons being explored. “My opinion is that mothers were exhausted by their maternal role but no one considered it an important or interesting topic. As soon as we came into a child-centred society, especially after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child was introduced in 1989, the pressure on parents grew.”

It’s not just about mothers, of course. Han-Son Lee, who lives in London, is the founder of [DaddiLife](#), an online fatherhood community with 250,000 members. He sees plenty of posts from men on the topic of parental burnout. “The language is always the same: ‘How do you guys manage this?’ It’s a solution-hunting exercise,” he says. “They’ve reached a cliff edge and are saying it’s unsustainable. The first few responses are always, ‘I’m glad someone said this.’” He adds, “The need and drive for dads to be more involved means they end up burning the candle at both ends. There’s a sense of being a failure if you’re not spending enough time with your children, and it comes with guilt and shame.”

---

For Ruth Chew, a 46-year-old PR consultant from Singapore and mother to daughters now aged 10 and 15, parenting left her “numb and frustrated”. In July 2021 she felt like “one of those cars trapped in an alley, doing three-point turns, unable to get out”, she says. “After I’d fed the kids or they were in school, I’d drive to a friend and just sit there. I thought, ‘I cannot mom any more.’ I had become everyone’s something – tech support, cook, taxi driver – but very little to myself. I loved my children but needed time apart.” When she was in a minor car accident, necessitating a doctor’s checkup, she says, “It was a very small accident, but my neurons were firing. My blood pressure was through the roof. My resilience was low and my stress was high. My doctor said, ‘I think you need to take a break.’”

As she recovered, Chew had to let go of the idea that good motherhood equalled perfection. “I think a lot of the cause was the mental stress and expectations we put on ourselves as mothers, wives, sisters, women,” she says.

*I told everyone: ‘I’m exhausted, I can’t push myself up the hill any more, so I’m just going to sit right here for a bit’*

She dialled down those expectations. “You can’t walk away from parent-teacher meetings or disagreements with your children, but I told everyone: ‘I’m a little exhausted, I can’t push myself up the hill any more, so I’m just going to sit right here for a bit.’ I told my daughter, who had an exam, ‘I have given you the tools that you need.’” Her husband was supportive: “He told me, ‘You do what you need.’”

When she examined what was triggering the feelings, she reassessed those, too. “I muted parent group chats with ‘one-up’ bragging rights and chose when to engage. On social media, I unfollowed a lot of ‘Hey guys, look how impressive I am’ types.”

While Chew wishes she had never burnt out, she views it as an awakening. “I wrestled a lot with guilt. I held on to the belief that if so-and-so could do this, why couldn’t I? But when I spoke to my own mother, she told me: ‘Your best is good enough.’”

Roskam explains that the roots of burnout are the “need to be a good parent ... It’s because you’re highly involved in your children.” Before it hits, she says, “you’ve probably been the best parent for several years or months”. But when that becomes untenable, the researchers have found that cortisol levels spike in both parents and children. [A 2020 study](#) by Roskam and Mikolajczak found the presence of hair cortisol – a universally recognised stress biomarker – to be 213% higher in those suffering parental burnout than in other demographically matched parents; the levels are higher than those in chronic pain patients, the researchers say, signifying the extent of distress experienced by these parents. After psychological treatment for the syndrome, the cortisol levels returned to normal.

When a parent is in burnout, Roskam says, partners and children often say they “cannot recognise their partner or parent” any more. She adds, “Children often talk about an event: the day their mother asked them to do something and they did not, so she cried and was furious.” It might sound trivial in itself, but it marks the straw that broke the camel’s back. Consequences can be serious: [a 2023 academic review](#) of 15 years of research into the topic reported a high correlation between violence and burnout, after following 4,450 parents through international studies. “Severe” escape and suicidal ideation were another

risk. In 2019, Mikolajczak wrote that parental burnout “strongly and linearly increases the frequency of neglectful and violent behaviours towards one’s children”.

---

In Manchester, Stern put in place changes to prevent burnout returning. “I learned to be OK asking for help, speaking up before things reached a crescendo,” she says. “I created ‘Rachel’s Rules’, a list that I stuck up at home: good is better than perfect; recognise when it’s time to take a break; it’s OK to say no.”

There is, she believes, real value in labelling the problem. “When I first had it, my parents were like, ‘Parenting’s hard,’” she says, adding that, in older generations, there is resistance to pathologising mental and emotional health. Stern reasons that, if health agencies acknowledge workplace burnout, they should also acknowledge this familial version. “If that is a globally accepted condition, with support structures in place, then why not recognise that burnout can happen in other areas of people’s lives? Having a label attached helps with that recognition.”

She adds, “If the rhetoric is, ‘Yeah, parenting’s hard’, then people who are really suffering feel they have to get on with it and can’t speak up or get help. There is this tipping point with burnout that carries a real mental health risk to parent and child, and their relationship. Calling it what it is will help this generation and future generations of parents get the support they need.”

Once back at work, and while still raising her sons, Stern trained with Roskam and Mikolajczak’s institute to help others through their experiences of the phenomenon, setting up as a [parental burnout coach](#). “I felt compelled to contribute to the field, raise awareness and, one day, do my own research to better understand this and make sure people don’t reach the point I did,” she says.

Today, she parents differently. “I’ve lowered my standards. I remind myself most days that all I need to do is get through, make sure everyone is fed and remember that OK is enough.” It has allowed her to enjoy more moments such as watching her youngest learn to read or going swimming with her eldest. “I still find it hard,” she says. “Characteristics of parental burnout come out. They’re nowhere near as extreme but I’m always going to be on the precipice.”