



Stress

Combating Burnout as a Single Working Parent

by Brigid Schulte and Stavroula Pabst

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Bernd Vogel/Getty Images

Alison Griffin, a senior vice president at Whiteboard Advisors, a social impact consulting firm, and a single mother of two boys, knows the exact moment when she hit the wall during the pandemic and felt burned out.

Griffin felt her company was committed to supporting parents, and single parents like her: They embraced flexibility. Griffin had been working remotely for years from Colorado for the Washington, DC-based firm. They provided parents additional funds to cover childcare during the pandemic. They cover 100% of employee health costs. But even with

support, the pandemic, quarantine, and school and childcare closures made what is challenging for single parents close to impossible.

For months, like so many other parents of young children navigating Covid-19, Griffin had been getting up at 5 AM and throwing on sweats to start working on an East-coast schedule. She'd make her boys breakfast while on conference calls, with her laptop on the kitchen counter and her airpods in. She'd be going nonstop — monitoring her kids' online schooling when she could — until about 5 or 6 PM. Then she'd root around in the fridge for something for dinner, more often than not resorting to grilled cheese sandwiches because she hadn't had time to buy groceries. She'd return to the emails that threatened to overwhelm her inbox once her kids were in bed and realize she hadn't made it to the post office, hadn't picked up prescriptions, hadn't bought milk for cereal in the morning, and was too exhausted to do anything about it.

But unlike parents with partners, Griffin had to white-knuckle through it alone.

Women, regardless of their marital status, have borne the brunt of childcare and homeschooling in the pandemic. It's part of why 2.3 million women have been forced out of the workforce. As a single parent, Griffin had no such option. She felt she was barely holding it together flying solo. The pandemic had cut off her “strategic village” of friends, neighbors, family, childcare, babysitters, carpools, school, after-school programs, and even her ex-husband that she, like so many other single parents, had carefully crafted to make it through each day. The stress had been building for months, then one day, unexpected road closures from wildfires turned a drive home from a board meeting into an eight-hour nightmare. That was it. She called a friend and sobbed, “I just need someone to hit pause for me right now.”

Griffin isn't alone. And while Covid might have made the situation worse, it certainly wasn't the cause. Long before the pandemic, parents (of any

marital status) in the United States already had one of the highest rates across the world of parental burnout — intense exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of ineffectiveness from parenting. And U.S. workers were already struggling with what some describe as an epidemic of workplace burnout: feeling depleted, cynical, and ineffective at work. One 2018 Gallup survey found that as many as two-thirds of full-time workers felt burned out on the job. The Covid-19 pandemic that has dragged on for more than a year has just intensified that burnout, particularly for mothers. One recent survey found that 9.8 million working mothers — nearly 30% more than working fathers — say they are experiencing workplace burnout, with cases higher among Black, Asian, and Latina mothers.

And single parents are under the greatest strain. “Nowhere is the stress greater,” according to a new study of single mothers in the pandemic by Rosanna Hertz, a sociologist at Wellesley College. Her report found that single mothers who lived alone with their children were more likely than mothers in multi-adult households to say that their work productivity had decreased as a result of their care responsibilities (57% to 47%). One single mother, echoing others, said, “I felt like my children were my priority, but there was pressure not to drop productivity at work.”

“The pandemic has exposed how we felt so challenged before it even started, and just blew it up,” said Paula Davis, author of *Beating Burnout at Work* and a single parent herself. “Burnout can happen when you have too many job demands and too few resources. Single parents have extra demands and potentially fewer resources. And time is certainly more scarce.”

And for single parents, who can least afford to burnout, the toll can be high.

Dr. Stephanie Lee, a senior director at the Child Mind Institute, has been observing widespread burnout in the communities she serves, particularly among single parents. “Single parents are particularly at risk in terms of

isolation because of all the things they need to do on a daily basis, and they have absolutely no help to do it,” she said. That isolation was what Matthew Burke, a school psychologist based in Philadelphia and single father of two boys, found particularly difficult when he found himself out of work and isolated and alone for most of the past year. “It’s a lot, it’s really challenging,” he said. “Nobody’s ever loved their boys more than me. But I miss parts of myself other than being a dad.”

Paula Davis, who now runs the Stress & Resilience Institute and works with organizations to reduce burnout, said burnout is rooted in work systems and cultures — think high work pressure with inadequate staff, lack of autonomy, recognition or support, and (particularly in the pandemic) lack of childcare — that requires holistic strategies to resolve. Yet while organizations and public policy must step up to support single working parents, Davis said there are steps that individuals themselves can take to build self-efficacy and alleviate at least some of the pain and stress of burnout.

See the big picture.

If people can understand that burnout is not an individual problem or personal failure that requires an individual solution to fix, they’re less likely to feel guilt or shame. Even Christina Maslach, the social psychologist who developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory, wrote recently that the whole point of developing the inventory was to prod employers to “establish healthier workplaces.” But that’s been a challenge, particularly in the United States with its overwork culture, long before the pandemic. So Davis suggests beginning to manage burnout by taking a stress inventory to become clearer on which tasks or situations are energizing and which are draining. In each instance, ask, “Am I energized by this? Am I learning something? Am I continuing to grow and develop?” The idea, Davis said, is to seek out and remember positive events and information, which can protect against burnout and instead build resilience.

Lower demands and tap into resources.

Burnout is about the mismatch between resources and demands. Work demands can be harder for workers to control — although talking to managers and communicating needs can help. Davis suggests single parents think broadly about how they can increase their resources. And that’s not just money and time (which can be scarce, particularly for single parents), but strengths. “If you’re optimistic, have hope, perseverance, a strong work ethic, a sense of humor, small moments of joy, how can you leverage your strengths more intentionally?” Davis said. “Who are the important people in your life you can connect to more regularly, even if virtually?”

Lowering demands can also mean single parents cutting themselves some slack. “The biggest thing that helps me when I start feeling burned out is letting go of my standards,” said Lauren Weizer, a single parent who works in advertising and has been struggling with constant interruptions from her seven-year-old daughter as they both try to work and homeschool at home without help. “I don’t expect things to be clean. I don’t expect to be able to cook a meal. I just try not to expect much from myself these days. There’s just so much on my plate.”

Keep track of small wins.

Dr. Lee of the Child Mind Institute advises single parents who are struggling to manage their multiple responsibilities to note their successes — even the small ones. “It’s just as important to focus on things you did accomplish in a day and making sure we acknowledge the absence of things: the absence of an argument, or an absence of an aggression, or the absence of a tantrum,” she said. “Everybody stayed safe today, and that’s honestly a win. If we’re missing an assignment or two, that’s not the end of the world.” As behavioral scientist [Adam Grant](#) writes, “the strongest buffer against burnout seems to be a sense of daily progress.”

Ask for help.

Single parents need support both at work and at home. For example, help from her community has helped Deanna Tenorio, an indigenous single

mother in New Mexico, cope with the strain of the last year of juggling a layoff from the restaurant where she worked, finding work, helping her 13-year-old son with virtual school, and going to school herself. At a particularly difficult time, she reached out to a community group, Free Access to Movement Childcare Collective. “They’ve dropped off food and groceries, cards, well wishes,” she said. “We just love getting our care packages” which has helped her not only survive but feel more connected to her neighbors and supported by her community.

Take a break and rest (when you can).

Myleen Leary, a management professor, said being a single parent has forced her to become more aware of her own time and energy and plan for downtime for herself. “At the best of times, I’ve trained my children about what it means when mommy says she needs quiet time,” Leary said. “I recognize that I need to make decisions that are good for the kids, but also good for me. That’s been harder during the pandemic, but I still try to do it.”

These steps are what has made all the difference for Alison Griffin’s recovery from burnout. After she hit the pandemic wall, she realized no one was going to hit the pause button for her. She realized, too, that she’d hidden her burnout so well under her veneer of productivity and professionalism that no one at work even knew. So she asked for help — and time off. With her boss’s blessing, she arranged for others to care for her two boys, for her job to be covered, and took a three-week paid mental health retreat.

Upon her return, she began to work with a therapist to set healthier boundaries between her work and home lives and multiple roles that had become so blurred. She now makes time to work out in the morning. She’s blocked her calendar for the times she needs to homeschool or attend to her boys and keeps a more consistent schedule. She tries to stay offline during the weekend. Every Monday, she prioritizes three work tasks and

three home tasks. And she doesn't say yes to anything new until they've all been accomplished.

But she wouldn't have been able to address her burnout unless her manager was willing to be flexible and her company offered paid time off, something she said she recognizes is a rare privilege for workers in the United States. "The pandemic has revealed our collective humanity, whether that's something as silly as a kid running behind you on a Zoom call, a cat on your lap, taking care of an elderly parent, waiting for a Covid shot, or relying on the delivery person for groceries," Griffin said. "I hope we're learning that when people have the flexibility to take care of themselves, we're all better off."

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