

AUTISM MUM SUPPORT

The Mental Load of Being an Autism Mum

When your mind is always planning, remembering, managing and worrying, it can feel as though there is no space left for you.

The mental load is the thinking that sits behind the visible caring. It is remembering the appointment before anyone asks, knowing which clothes are tolerated, noticing that a routine is about to change, anticipating the effect of a noisy room, keeping track of school messages, food, sleep, medication, forms, siblings, work and the emotional needs of the family. Much of this work happens silently, which is why other people may underestimate how demanding it can be.

For an autism mum, the load can be particularly complex because planning is often not simply about convenience. Predictability, sensory needs, communication differences, transitions and recovery time may genuinely affect whether an activity is manageable. A five-minute outing for another family can require a long chain of preparation for yours.

The invisible tabs open in your head

You may be physically doing one thing while mentally holding ten others: Did school reply? Is tomorrow non-uniform day? Will the supermarket be too busy? Has the safe food run out? Does the appointment clash with collection? Did I send that form? Is my child becoming overloaded? Have I given enough attention to the other children? Have I answered work? What happens if the plan changes?

The problem is not that you care too much. The problem is that one person can become the storage system for an entire family's needs. When everything is held in one mind, even a small additional request can feel enormous.

Anticipatory thinking

Many mums become highly skilled at predicting difficulty. You learn from experience which environments, demands, transitions or misunderstandings may lead to distress. That knowledge can be protective, but it can also mean your brain rarely gets to switch off. You may be planning several steps ahead even when nothing is currently wrong.

This can create a strange experience: other people see a calm moment, while you are already managing what might happen in an hour, tomorrow or next week. The absence of a visible crisis does not necessarily mean the absence of effort.

WHEN EVERYTHING FEELS IMPORTANT

Decision fatigue

Repeated decisions use capacity. What time should we leave? Do we explain the change now or later? Can we manage this appointment today? Should I push school again? Is this behaviour communication, anxiety, sensory overload, tiredness, pain, hunger or something else? There is rarely a perfect answer, yet parents can feel responsible for getting every decision right.

Decision fatigue can look like procrastination, irritability, shutting down, struggling to choose simple things or suddenly feeling unable to deal with one more question. Reducing unnecessary choices can therefore be supportive rather than lazy.

Separate remembering from caring

Loving somebody does not require you to keep every detail in your head. Externalising information can reduce cognitive load. Use whatever system genuinely works for your household: one shared calendar, a visible weekly plan, phone reminders, a single place for school information, recurring shopping lists, photographs of important documents, or a short checklist for predictable routines.

The aim is not to create a beautiful organisation system that becomes another job. The best system is the one that removes remembering from your brain.

MENTAL LOAD	ONE WAY TO LIGHTEN IT
Appointments and deadlines	Shared calendar + reminders
School communication	One folder/email label + short action list
Safe foods and essentials	Repeat shopping list / minimum-stock list
Preparing for transitions	Reusable checklist rather than starting again
Household responsibilities	Give another adult full ownership, not just 'help'
Worries circling at night	Write tomorrow's next action down, then stop planning

Help is different from shared responsibility

Sometimes somebody says, 'Just tell me what you need me to do.' Although well intended, this can leave the mental load exactly where it was: Mum still has to notice the task, decide what needs doing, explain it, remind the person and check that it happened. Where possible, share ownership rather than individual jobs. Another adult might completely own one school communication stream, prescriptions, a weekly activity, laundry or a regular appointment.

True sharing means you are not the project manager of somebody else's contribution.

MAKING SPACE IN YOUR HEAD

The three-list reset

1. **Must happen:** genuinely time-sensitive or essential tasks.
2. **Can wait:** things that matter but do not need to happen today.
3. **Not mine alone:** responsibilities that can be shared, delegated, discussed or dropped.

If your 'must' list contains everything, ask what would actually happen if one item waited. Families under pressure can gradually start treating every demand as urgent. Creating hierarchy helps the nervous system distinguish today's problem from next week's problem.

The 'good enough' question

Perfection is expensive when capacity is low. A good-enough dinner, a shorter email, clean clothes left unfolded, declining an optional event or using the easiest workable routine can protect energy for what genuinely matters. Accommodating your family's needs may also mean doing things differently from other households. Different is not automatically wrong.

When other people judge what they cannot see

People may see a cancelled event, a child using a device, a different bedtime, limited foods, an unusual school arrangement or a parent saying no. They do not necessarily see the reasoning, preparation and lived experience behind that decision. You do not owe everybody a complete explanation of your family.

A useful boundary can be: **'This is what works for us at the moment.'** It communicates a decision without inviting a debate.

Check your own sensory and emotional load

Mum may also be affected by noise, touch, clutter, interrupted sleep, competing conversations and unpredictable demands. This is especially relevant for neurodivergent mums, but anyone can become overloaded. Consider what reduces input for you: lower lighting, headphones when safe, fewer simultaneous conversations, predictable quiet time, comfortable clothing, written rather than telephone communication, or simply closing a door for five minutes while another safe adult takes over.

These are not rewards. They are ways of reducing demand.

A quick mental-load check-in

What am I currently remembering for everyone?
Which of those things could live somewhere other than my head?
What am I doing because it is necessary, and what am I doing because I fear being judged?
Which responsibility needs another owner?
What can be 'good enough' this week?
What would create ten percent more breathing room?

YOU ARE PART OF THE FAMILY TOO

When the load becomes too heavy

If you are persistently exhausted, unable to recover, increasingly anxious or low, struggling to function, or feeling that you cannot continue carrying the current level of demand, it is reasonable to seek more support. Practical changes can matter as much as traditional self-care. Depending on circumstances, this might include family help, peer support, a carer's assessment, school or social-care conversations, workplace adjustments, counselling, or speaking to your GP about your own wellbeing.

If you feel unsafe or believe you may harm yourself or somebody else, seek urgent help through emergency or crisis services rather than trying to manage alone.

UK starting points

Your GP: for concerns about your own mental or physical wellbeing.

Local authority carer's assessment: unpaid carers can ask their council about an assessment of how caring affects them and what support may be available.

Carers UK: information about carers' rights, work, benefits and practical support.

National Autistic Society: autism information and resources for autistic people and families.

Contact: information and support for families with disabled children, including education, benefits and family life.

Availability and eligibility vary and can change, so check current information directly with the relevant organisation or local authority.

Message from Maggie

There is a kind of tiredness that comes from doing things, and another kind that comes from never being able to stop thinking about what needs doing next. The mental load often sits in the second one. Other people may not see it because so much of it happens quietly inside your head. I want you to recognise that invisible work. You do not have to prove how much you are carrying before you are allowed to put something down. Start small. Move one responsibility out of your head. Let one thing be good enough. Ask somebody else to own one job completely. Your mind deserves somewhere to rest too.

Space to Breathe Therapy