

There's no getting around it, early parenthood is exhausting. Whatever approach you take to your baby's sleep, you will be tired in a way it was impossible to imagine before you had a child. And I hate to be the bearer of bad news but even when they reach that elusive milestone of "sleeping through" most nights, you'll still be tired. It's hard work! It's a full time job, combined for many of us with another job.

This is a time in our life when self-care takes on a new meaning, just at the time when many of the things you might previously have categorised as "self-care" become almost impossible to achieve. Gone are the days of lie-ins, yoga classes, time or mental space to cook nourishing meals from scratch.

With time and space for ourselves diminished, we can easily end up feeling depleted, burnt out, and overwhelmed. It's times like these that we are most likely to be taken in by the alluring promises of sleep training programmes that promise quick and miraculous results. "If I could just fix my baby's sleep", we think to ourselves, "everything else would be manageable."

Our babies can often bear the brunt of the fact that our society is not set up to support new parents. If we have made a commitment to support our babies' sleep responsively, we need to do everything we can to make everything else as manageable as possible.

So one way that self-care can manifest now is in being realistic about your capacities, and working out how you can lighten your own load so that you have the time, energy and mental space required to parent. For me, thinking about how things work at home and how to manage and ease the domestic burden has been even more important since having a child.

Obviously the first step, if you have a partner at home, is to start an honest conversation about how the labour can be shared most equitably. And once you've got that started, here are some other ideas from me and other members of the Stroud Gentle Parenting Network about how you can lighten the load at home...

Food

- Online grocery shopping and deliveries rather than making trips to the shop
- Buying ready-made meals (ideally find nutritious ones!)
- Using ready-prepared fresh ingredients (eg chopped frozen onions, ready-chopped vegetables or meat, ready-grated cheese, microwaveable rice or grains)
- Come up with a few very simple (eg 5-10 minutes of preparation) meal ideas and write them down for times your brain can't remember them
- Batch cook and freeze meals when you have capacity
- If one person in the house is making a packed lunch (say to take to work), make a packed lunch for the person staying at home too.
- Have snacky meals at least once a week (in my house we call this “bits” - a buffet of everything you've got in the fridge, plus some salad if you have any, and some bread.
- Do you have a close friend who could feed you and your little one occasionally, and you could do the same for them? Feeding someone else doesn't take much more effort than feeding just your own family, but not having to think about cooking or clearing up can be a huge relief when things are feeling overwhelming.



Housework

- Lower your standards a bit (or a lot) in the home. Accept that things may be messier or less clean for a while.
- If things are untidy and it's overwhelming/stressful, put everything on the floor or surfaces into a washing basket to deal with when you have more capacity.
- Little and often, rather than things building up. One friend has found a cordless vacuum cleaner revolutionary, as she can use it in little bursts through the day rather than hoovering being a big project.

“Depending on the age of the child, get them to help - from the age of two, my son has loved mopping, hoovering and sorting the washing. He's now good enough to mop the bathroom floors whilst I clean some of the rest of the bathroom.”

- Make chores a game so you can play and connect and do chores at the same time.
- Could you hire a cleaner - either as a one-off when things feel too much, or more often to help you keep on top of things?
- “I give myself time off as if I'm an employee of the household.”



Make use of any social support you have around:

- If family or good friends are nearby, could you ask them to do a load of laundry occasionally, or drop you round a meal?
- “I find calling a friend to chat whilst I tidy really helps me. I don’t concentrate on tidying up and it doesn’t feel so stressful with a friend to talk to. I also invite friends over and ask them to sit with me and chat while I do jobs.”
- “Get together with a friend. One day your house, one day theirs. Kids can play and chores feel so much better with a friend – and someone else’s cleaning/washing up is always so much more fun than your own!”
- If you don't have family nearby, could you hire a nanny or post-natal doula to support you at home? Investigate those who are training as they are often able to offer lower rates.



I hope that this guide has helped you feel more resourced and given you ideas for how things could become more manageable right now. You're doing amazing work!

If you are really struggling with your child's sleep need any further support or guidance, please don't hesitate to get in touch. I work one-to-one with families offering support around sleep transitions and making sleep more sustainable for the whole family.

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