Three American mothers on the brink [1]

Eleven months, multiple breakdowns, one harrowing realization: They've got to get back up and do it all again tomorrow.
Author: Bennett, Jessica
Source: The New York Times
Format: Article
Publication Date: 4 Feb 2021

AVAILABILITY
Access online [2]

EXCERPT

Dekeda Brown, 41, was in her local grocery store in Olney, Md., thinking back to a year ago, when she was onstage in New York accepting an award for "Working Mother of the Year." Her husband watched proudly from the crowd, texting photos to her daughters, 11 and 15.

Almost exactly one year later, Dekeda was standing in the wine aisle, cellphone and keys in hand, contemplating whether she should begin smashing bottles. "I was like, what's the worst thing that could happen if I just did this right now?" she said.

Liz Halfhill, 30, let out a guttural scream from her bedroom in Spokane, Wash. It was 6:30 a.m., and her 11-year-old son — watching cartoons in the living room — screamed back.

The shouts had become something of a morning ritual for them in the pandemic — a catharsis amid the stress of the last 11 months. "Waking up is hard, everything feels hard right now, so we let it out," she said.

Mercedes Quintana, 29, wondered why on earth she ever thought cooking three separate breakfasts for her family was a good idea. "We never had homemade meals growing up, so I think I define myself as a good mom by providing them," she said.

Today, she was home in Temecula, Calif., with a spatula in one hand and a computer in the other: making chocolate pancakes for her daughter, 3, black beans and toast for her husband and a sweet potato mash for herself, while trying to connect a Zoom call. But her headphones wouldn't sync; now the beans were burning in the pan. "It's 9:31 a.m., and I'm frustrated and stressed out already," she said.

Three mothers, in three different parts of the country. They are stressed, burned out, unraveling at the seams the pandemic has exposed.

We began following them in September. The mothers have kept logs of their time — by text, email and audio — and sat for dozens of interviews. What has emerged is a story of chaos and resilience, resentment and persistence, and of course, hope. In other words: What it means to be a mother.

"Some days are so busy they feel like they don't even exist," said Liz, a full-time paralegal and part-time student who has struggled to find child care for her son, Max. "It's like I just went through 24 hours and I don't even remember any of it because I was just, go, go, go, move, move, move."

There has long been a refrain among working women in America that to get ahead, the "mom" part of their lives needed to be hidden from view — lest they be viewed as "uncommitted" to the work or somehow less fit for the job. For hourly wage workers — and many of those now tasked with doing the essential work to keep our country running — that burden has often been even more pronounced.

But there is no hiding anymore. The struggles of working parents — and moms, in particular — have never been more in our faces.

And yet this work — the planning, the coordinating, the multitasking, the hustling — often goes unnoticed. It is largely unsung.

Moms carry the burden. In opposite-sex couples, it is mothers who do the majority of the domestic chores and child-related planning, even when both parents work and the woman is the breadwinner. It is moms who tend to be responsible for the health of their families — the sick days, the doctor's appointments, the worrying about germs — as well as the caring for older relatives. Moms remain the vast majority of single parents in this country, some of whom have had to choose in this pandemic between leaving young children at home alone or risking their jobs.

"It's a recipe for madness," said Laurel Elder, a political scientist at Hartwick College in New York who has been studying the mental health effects of parenting in the pandemic. It's a cliché, but it's also true: You don't get a day off from being a mom.

Some have hoped this could be a galvanizing moment for mothers. A point of common rage. The moment when it became clear, once and for all, that "our system and our politicians have completely abandoned working parents," said Jessica Lee, a senior attorney at the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of Law.

But who really has the energy to be angry — or even to advocate for change — when they're just trying to get through the day?

This is a story of three mothers, trying to stay afloat.

I: CHAOS

Dekeda was sitting at her dining room table — her "war room," as she calls it — with two laptops open, typing like a court stenographer. In her left ear, she was listening in on a conference call for work; in her right was the voice of her 15-year-old daughter's special education teacher, giving a math lesson. Leilani, who has severe nonvocal autism and sensory processing disorder — meaning, she cannot speak words, needs help with most daily tasks and finds everyday stimuli excruciating — communicates with the teacher by touch-screen.

It was late afternoon, and Dekeda's husband, Derrick, 46, had just walked in the door from work. He is a building engineer at a medical office. He waved hello, called up the stairs to London, 11, and made his usual beeline to the fridge.

Dekeda opened her mouth to remind him to wash his hands, but he began motioning toward the computer. "The teacher called on Leilani!" he said.

Quickly, Dekeda unmuted the computer and apologized, then helped her daughter type her answer into the screen. Moments later, she heard a pause in her other ear. It was from her boss. "What do you think, Dekeda?"

"This went on for an hour," Dekeda said, of the toggling back and forth, trying not to mix up the mute buttons, apologizing to each party. "At the end, I retreated to my bedroom and cried."

Dekeda jokes that she doesn't know who she is these days, but that she used to be June Cleaver.

She worked out, got the girls off to two different schools each morning and managed to have dinner on the table by 7. On weekends, she was active in her church, coached a Special Olympics cheer squad and was an outspoken voice for the autism community; she runs a nonprofit devoted to destigmatizing the lives of special needs parents.

"Everything happened like clockwork," she said, "and I was so cheerful with it all."

These days, she is neither particularly cheerful nor on time. Church is now on Facebook, there is no more cheer practice, nor weekend date nights with her husband. She considers it a success if she makes it through the day without their puppy, Boomer — did she mention she got the girls a puppy in the pandemic? — peeing in the house.

"I'm an autism mom, and we always say, 'We can't get sick, we can't die and we can't have the breakdowns that we need,'" she said. "I have to keep it together for everyone else."

She is overdue for a mammogram and a follow-up with her gynecologist. She has been trying to find time to make an appointment with a therapist for almost a year. And she worries, she worries so much. About her husband's safety (he's had two Covid scares at work), about her kids' development, about all of their mental health.

Lately, London, her 11-year-old, has been getting up early to make her mother tea and put the eggs on for breakfast. She offers to help her big sister with school when Dekeda has a work call. Which would be a huge help, if Dekeda didn't feel so guilty about it.

"In a nutshell, we are holding together with the same tape that we have been using since March," she said. "The tape is barely working, but we are still here."

II: RESIGNATION

Liz would like you to know that she never wanted to home-school.

She will do it because she has to, and she will try to do it well. But sitting in the parking lot of her son's elementary school on a Sunday, trying to catch a Wi-Fi signal to download his curriculum for distance learning — available only on the school's network — is not, let her repeat not, where she would like to be right now.

It was the beginning of the school year in Spokane, a former mining town in eastern Washington known for its apple orchards, now the second-biggest city in the state. The sky was hazy from the wildfires that had spread along the West Coast. "I'm doing my best, but this is not my fricking talent, OK?" said Liz, in a fast-paced staccato. "I'm a great mom and I'm good at momming, but I'm not good at educating."

Liz and her ex-husband moved to Spokane from Idaho five years ago. They broke up shortly after they arrived. Liz is now the primary caregiver for Max, a rambunctious 11-year-old who loves "Hamilton" and Minecraft and is a bit small for his age.

She has managed as well as one might expect for a single, full-time working person whose income hinges on sending her child to school. The law firm where she works as a paralegal, making $21 an hour without benefits, has made it clear that working in the office is preferable — in part because the local court system is archaic (it requires printing and in person drop-offs). But the receptionist in her office refuses to wear a mask.

When infection rates were lower, Liz sent Max to the local Y.M.C.A. They also tried the Boys & Girls Club, where she qualified for a reduced fee, but it was a long drive from home. Max has spent days with her friend Jillian, another adult friend, Durgai, and a few times he and the 9-year-old daughter of a single dad friend, Trevor, stayed home alone with the doors locked.

"It's been an 11-month game of 'Where do I safely dump my kid?'" she said.

The current Band-Aid is Susan — and thank goodness for Susan — a neighborhood mom with a son Max's age who has agreed to monitor both kids during the school day.

If Liz, still sitting in the elementary school parking lot, ever manages to connect to the damn Wi-Fi, she will swing by Susan's house to drop off snacks for the week.

III: DROWNING

Sometimes dark thoughts creep into Mercedes's mind.

She becomes terrified, sometimes unrealistically so, to take her daughter to the park or to pick up groceries at the store. It's not just the germs — though she is afraid of them, too — but other, more sinister things: What if Mila, 3, wanders away in the grocery store and somebody kidnaps her? What if she loses sight of her at the playground and she gets molested by a stranger?

Sometimes Mercedes shakes with nerves. Sometimes it's hard to breathe.

She has struggled with anxiety and depression before, and had a particularly hard time postpartum. But the past year has felt endless. Her husband is shut in his office, working three jobs to help pay their mortgage, her child screaming, "MAMA NO WORK!!" when she opens her laptop.

Mercedes and her family live in a new housing development near Temecula, an inland suburb about 60 miles north of San Diego. Both she and her husband, Eddie, 44, work in mental health. She is a part-time case manager for a nonprofit, where she specializes in addiction; he manages an outpatient program and treats private therapy patients on the side.

It is understandable that two people who make their living counseling others might be too exhausted at the end of the day to talk about their own problems. But it can also mean that anxious thoughts spiral in her head, often with nobody but a preschooler to talk to. "All day long, literally every client Eddie is talking to is about Covid," Mercedes said. "He is often burned out from the same conversation that I want to have."

It's not uncommon for Mercedes to wake up to urgent messages about the health of a client — most recently, a schizophrenic woman, off her medication, who had been found rummaging through a dumpster. Mercedes needed to get her into a treatment facility immediately.

These moments are stressful, but she is trained to manage them. The harder part is everything going on around it: the housework, the laundry, the tantrums, the cooking, the constant state of noise and mess and tasks that make her feel as if she's drowning.

"The things I'd use to 'refill my cup' aren't available anymore," she said. "I can't impulsively tour a preschool after Mila throws a tantrum. I can't ask my mom to come spend the day without questioning our safety. I can't take an hour to myself and go get a pedicure. I can't get away."

IV: EXHAUSTION

School had been going fine.

Max hates it, he said it sucks, his head hurts. He got caught playing a video game during class, and had his phone privileges taken away. But his teacher is kind, he is completing most of his assignments and he got to build a fort with his home-schooling friends — a real one, "with insulation and roofing and everything."

But then Max's home-schooling buddy, Susan's son, came down with a fever. It was strep throat, which was a relief for everyone, but the boy had an allergic reaction to the antibiotics. Susan needed a break.

Liz spent the morning of the strep throat scare preparing her boss for a trial and giving Max feedback on a squirrel drawing. She was trying to find the right moment to explain that she would have to work from home. "I don't think they would fire me," she said, "but the possibility is always there."

Liz likes to say that she learned from her parents everything not to do. She grew up poor, in rural Washington and Idaho, to parents who struggled with mental health disorders and alcoholism.

"Growing up I was really invalidated, undervalued. No one ever cared about my schooling," she said. "So I do the opposite of that with Max."

Liz had planned to study environmental science in college, but she dropped out when her mother was hospitalized after a suicide attempt. Then she got pregnant with Max.

The paralegal thing was a bit of a fluke. The lawyer she hired to help with her divorce — "She was the cheapest one I could find," she said — needed a legal assistant, and was willing to work around Max's kindergarten schedule. She encouraged her to enroll in the paralegal program at the local community college.

Liz is now one course away from that degree, which will allow her to get licensed and hopefully bump her hourly pay.

She has been working with a mortgage broker to improve her credit, hoping she will soon qualify for a loan to buy her home. (She and Max rent a small wood-frame house with a yard three blocks from Max's school. Its owners are willing to sell when she has the money.)

"This is why I can't lose my job," she said.

Liz has enough savings for a couple of months of rent, were something to happen, but it would mean draining her down payment fund. She has health insurance through the state, but no paid vacation. Max's dad is not entirely out of the picture — he takes Max on weekends — but she can't rely on him, she said.

And so, usually late at night, the what ifs circle in her head. What if she gets sick? What if she loses her job? Where will Max go tomorrow, next week, next month? Sometimes her heart pounds so hard she feels like it is coming out of her chest.

“Society gives you a lot of ways to get ahead, even when you don’t come from anything,” Liz said. “And I’ve done really, really well with those — I feel like I’ve checked every box. But this thing has completely ripped the rug out from under me.”

V: RESENTMENT

Mercedes woke up in a bad mood.

Her body hurt. “My hips, knees and feet feel like I just walked around a theme park for three days straight,” she said. She felt unmotivated to do anything. And she couldn’t stop thinking about “gender roles.”

She and her husband both had early work trainings that morning — training Mercedes actually wanted to engage in. “Yet he gets to lock himself in his office all day while I’m expected to entertain Mila and make breakfast for everyone,” she said. “Why can’t he do it? Why am I expected to do it all?”

Her husband is the primary breadwinner in their family, so she knows that is part of the answer. But on this day, it was as if the world was rubbing it in her face.

Mila was crying to play and Eddie kept telling her “later” — then disappearing into his office. While Mercedes was on the phone with a client whose mother had died, Mila began screaming “MAMA!” and Eddie began popping popcorn. Later, as she worked, trying to keep Mila entertained, he took a nap on the couch.

“On days like this, I wish he’d just go into his office and close the door, so I wouldn’t have any expectation of getting any help,” she said.

When Mercedes first returned to work in September 2019, after an extended leave post-pregnancy, she was excited. She enjoyed the work, and it was nice to be greeted by an excited toddler when she got home at night.

But she feels so deflated now. She moves between worrying that she will be fired for poor performance, hoping it happens (“Is that terrible?” she asked) and wanting to quit of her own volition, but wondering what on earth will happen to her identity if she does.

“I’m trying to figure out how I can be more organized with work. But also how to be more present as a mother and wife,” she said. “But then I’m like, ‘Oh crap, what about Mercedes? Where do I fit myself in?’”

VI: PERSEVERANCE

On some days, Dekeda feels like she is killing the distance learning game.

“London will be upstairs at her laptop, fully engaged in class, while I multitask between helping Leilani and a video call for work,” she said.

On other days, no matter how hard she tries to stay organized, how many lists she makes or efficient she is, she just can’t.

This was one of those days.

It was a few weeks before Christmas, and the girls were excited because it was supposed to snow.

They had taken out their ski clothes, and were waiting for Dekeda to finish work so she could take them (and the puppy — it was his first snow) out to play.

Dekeda was finishing up at her computer when the emails began to arrive, one after the next. There were six in total, from teachers at London’s school, informing Dekeda: Her 11-year-old was failing. All but one class.

Dekeda and London have a pact: London can tell her mother anything and she will not get in trouble, as long as she is honest. But lately, Dekeda worried about her normally spunky, opinionated daughter. “We’ll have these chats where I think everything is OK, and then she bursts into tears.”

Dekeda knew that London had been struggling with her assignments. She’d been working with her nightly to help her get organized. But she didn’t know things had gotten this bad.

Dekeda handed her phone to her daughter, and asked her to read the emails. “I never baby talk to London,” Dekeda said.

She read the messages, and her eyes welled with tears. “But Mommy, we’ve been working so hard,” London said, gazing out the window at the snow.

“No, I understand. We’ve been working on getting these things submitted,” Dekeda told her daughter: “You can still go out. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?” London asked her.

“Yes, you deserve it. Go ahead,” Dekeda told her. “We’ll look at the work when you get back in.”

Derrick had emerged in the living room by then, long enough to overhear what was going on. “I’ll take them,” he told his wife, grabbing the puppy’s leash.

London, Leilani, Derrick and Boomer went outside to play, while Dekeda sat in silence with a cup of tea.

“Sometimes I have to tell myself I cannot do it all,” she said. “That I cannot juggle all of these balls at once and not expect to drop one or two from time to time.”

“And that is OK.”

VII: HOPE

There are times when Dekeda looks at her daughters and appreciates the little things she might have missed were she not at home this year: Daily games of tug of war with their puppy, roller skating together in parking lots, which is therapeutic for Leilani and fun for London and Dekeda, too.

Mercedes thinks to afternoons in the car with Mila, belting the lyrics to the “Frozen” soundtrack — often without a destination — which have become a kind of ritual when things get tough.

For Liz, the past months have marked the most consistent time she has spent with Max since he was a baby, for which she has been particularly grateful. “He’s about to hit puberty, he’ll probably hate me really soon, so this has actually been very precious quality time,” she said.

And now there is another emotion appearing: hope.

Hope for the vaccine, which Dekeda’s husband will soon get. Hope for help, in the form of an autism aide for Leilani (she comes for two hours a day now, to give Dekeda a break) and Mercedes’s mother-in-law, who is babysitting Mila one day a week. Hope for a physical return to school, which Max will resume part time later this month.

Liz recently started a new job — at another law firm in town, which offered her a small raise and paid vacation for the first time. She still has to go to the office, but she negotiated a later start time to her days, so she has time to get Max settled at the Boys & Girls Club on days he’s not in school.

Mercedes turned down an offer to fill in for a full-time colleague at work — it just wasn’t feasible right now — but is considering going back to school for her therapist’s license once day care resumes. Maybe she and her husband can start a family practice; maybe they’ll even consider having another kid.

The busyness will not subside in these scenarios, of course, but life may become more manageable. Anything has got to be easier than this.

“I was just thinking that this morning,” said Liz, from her new office overlooking downtown Spokane. “Like, we made it through societal collapse, we were scrappy. It should not have had to be this way. But it was and we made it through.”

Region: United States [3]

Tags: parents [4]

access [5]

work/life balance [6]

Links

[1] https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/02/three-american-mothers-brink [2] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/04/parenting/covid-pandemic-mothers-primal-scream.html [3] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865 [4] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/parents [5] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/access [6] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/5668