

The mental load — and how to talk about it

The mental load is the invisible work of running a home: noticing what needs doing, planning how and when, and remembering it until it's done. Two people can split the chores evenly while one carries almost all of the noticing. That person is running a household in their head all day — and it doesn't show up on any chore chart.

Every job is really three jobs

Noticing

Seeing it needs doing at all. The shampoo is low; the form is due; the coat is too small. Noticing never switches off, which is why it's the tiring part.

Planning

Working out how and when. Which night suits the dentist, what to cook around a late meeting. Invisible until it fails — then suddenly very visible.

Doing

The part everyone sees, and the only part a chore chart counts. "Just tell me what to do" offers to share this third and hands the other two back.

Six steps for the conversation

- 1 Pick the moment.** Not mid-task, not mid-argument. Flag it in advance so it isn't an ambush.
"Can we take twenty minutes on Sunday to talk about how the house runs?"
- 2 Make it structural.** Lead with the pattern, not the person — you inherited this setup rather than chose it.
"I don't think you're doing this on purpose. I think we picked up a setup most couples run."
- 3 Name the three parts.** Noticing, planning, doing — and only the third is visible.
"Emptying the dishwasher is the doing. I'm also the one who notices we're out of tablets."
- 4 One example, not a running tally.** Walk one job through end to end. The full picture comes in step 5, built together.
"The form took two minutes. Remembering it took a fortnight."
- 5 Look at a number together.** Put the household on paper, or do the free two-minute Split Check side by side.
"I don't want to argue from memory — can we just see what it says?"
- 6 Ask for ownership, not help.** Helping keeps you as the manager. Whole jobs move across, noticing included.
"I don't want you to help with the groceries. I want the groceries to be yours."

Four openers that reliably backfire

- ✗ **Reciting the list at them.** Sounds like evidence to you, like an accusation to them.
- ✗ **"You never..." / "I always..."** One counter-example and you're arguing about the exception.
- ✗ **Raising it mid-task.** At 10pm over the dishwasher it's heard as a mood, not a proposal.
- ✗ **"Just help out more."** The most natural ask — and the one that changes least.

It's a pattern, not a personal complaint

30.4 v 16.4 AUSTRALIA Hours a week of unpaid domestic work — mothers against fathers. Close to double.	32% v 8% AUSTRALIA Mothers vs fathers dissatisfied with the split — in the same households.	54 min UNITED KINGDOM Extra unpaid work done by women every day — over six hours a week.	3.6 hrs UNITED STATES Extra weekly leisure for husbands where both partners earn about the same.
---	--	---	---