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Depleted mother syndrome among working mothers: Causes and coping

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Abstract

Depleted mother syndrome is to describe the challenges faced by mothers, particularly those who are working. Working women who are also mothers often experience a combination of professional and parenting demands, which can contribute to feeling of exhaustion and stress. There are many factors that are associated with the challenges faced by working mothers such as family responsibilities, cooperation of spouse, multiple role, psychological factors, financial pressure etc. The purpose of this study is (I) to identify the factors responsible for feelings of depletion or exhaustion among working mothers, especially those who are balancing work and parenting responsibilities (II) to explore how these challenges impact various aspects of a mother's life including physical health, mental health, and overall quality of life and (III) propose some strategies to support mothers in managing stress, achieving better work-life balance, and promoting overall well-being. For this purpose intensive review of literature have been done through different articles, sites, and studies etc. It's important for working mothers to prioritize self-care, seek support from partners, family, or colleagues, and communicate openly about their needs. Employers can also contribute by fostering a supportive work environment, offering flexible work arrangements, and acknowledging the unique challenges faced by working mothers.

Keywords: Working mother, depleted mother syndrome, physical factor, psychological factor, family and social factor

Introduction

A working mother is a woman who engages in employment outside the home while also fulfilling the responsibilities of raising and caring for her children. This term acknowledges that women can pursue careers and contribute to the workforce while balancing the demands of motherhood. Several challenges and problems are associated with being a working mother. Some of these include:

Work-life balance: Juggling the demands of a career and parenting can be challenging. Finding the right balance between professional responsibilities and family commitments is often a constant struggle.

Time management: Working mothers often face the pressure of managing their time efficiently to fulfill both work and family obligations. This includes coordinating schedules, handling household chores, and ensuring quality time with their children.

Guilt: Many working mothers experience guilt about not spending enough time with their children or feeling like they may not be meeting societal expectations of the ideal mother. This emotional burden can be emotionally taxing.

Childcare concerns: Finding reliable and affordable childcare is a common challenge for working mothers. Navigating options such as daycare, babysitters, or family support can be complex.

Career advancement: Some working mothers face obstacles in career advancement due to biases, stereotypes, or limited flexibility in the workplace. Balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities can be a delicate task.

Financial pressure: In some cases, families may depend on the income of a working mother to meet financial needs. This can create additional stress and pressure to succeed in both professional and personal spheres.

Societal expectations: Working mothers may face societal expectations and judgments, as societal norms around motherhood and employment can vary. Striking a balance that aligns with personal values while navigating societal expectations can be challenging.

Physical and emotional exhaustion: The dual role of a working mother can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion. Meeting the demands of a job and parenting can leave little time for self-care, potentially impacting overall well-being.

Depleted mother syndrome a term sometimes used colloquially to describe the physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by mothers, especially working mothers with demanding responsibilities like childcare. It highlights the challenges faced by mothers especially working mothers who may feel overwhelmed, fatigued, and emotionally drained due to the demands of parenting, various life responsibilities and work. It's essential for individuals experiencing such feeling to seek support, whether from family, friends, or professionals, to address their well-being. It's important to note that if someone is experiencing significant distress, consulting with a healthcare professional or mental health expert can provide personalized guidance and support. Depleted mother syndrome develops in working mothers due to intricate interplay of factors. This includes physical, psychological, family and social factors.

Physical factors

Depleted mother syndrome is not a recognized medical or psychological term, but it may be used to describe a range of challenges faced by working women that contribute to physical and exhaustion. Research indicates that working mothers may experience various physical health outcomes influenced by the demands of balancing work and family life. Possible physical factors could include:

- Health issues – Pre-existing health conditions or chronic illnesses can amplify the challenges of parenting and contribute to fatigue.
- Chronic stress – Juggling multiple responsibilities, such as parenting, work, and household duties, can lead to chronic stress.
- Sleep deprivation – Caring for a child often involves disrupted sleep patterns, which can significantly impact a mother's well-being.
- Lack of self-care – Neglecting self-care due to prioritizing others can result in physical and emotional burnout.

It's crucial for individuals experiencing such challenges to seek help, whether through professional counseling, building a support network, or making adjustments to their lifestyle.

Psychological factors

Numerous studies suggest that working mothers often face challenges balancing career and family responsibilities, which can impact psychological health. Kaila (2008) ^[2] found that women who play a lot of roles at work have high level of stress, which leads to absenteeism, low job satisfaction, plan to quit, and a lack of interest in activities at home. Many psychological effects associated with depleted mother syndrome among working mothers can conclude:

- High expectations – Unrealistic societal expectations or self-imposed standards for being a perfect mother can lead to stress and a sense of inadequacy.
- Isolation – Feeling socially isolated or lacking a support network can exacerbate feeling of exhaustion and loneliness.

- Emotional exhaustion: Mothers may experience heightened emotional exhaustion due to the constant demand of care giving, leading to feeling of depletion.
- Increased stress: Juggling multiple responsibilities can contribute to chronic stress, impacting mental well-being.
- Anxiety and overwhelm – Managing various aspects of life and parenting can result in feeling of anxiety and being overwhelmed.
- Guilt and self-doubt – Mothers may feel guilty about not meeting perceived expectations or doubt their abilities as caregiver.
- Depression – Prolonged stress and exhaustion can contribute to symptoms of depression in some individuals.
- Strained relationship – The emotional toll may affect relationship, causing strain with partners, family, or friends.
- Loss of personal identity – Mothers may struggle with maintaining a sense of self outside of their role as caregivers, impacting self-esteem.
- Perfectionism - Having excessively high standards or striving for perfection in parenting can lead to increased stress and a sense of inadequacy.
- Prioritizing others over self – Putting the needs of children and family consistently ahead of personal well-being may lead to neglecting self-care.
- Poor time management – Difficulty in effectively managing time and setting boundaries can contribute to overwhelming responsibilities.
- Lack of coping strategies – Insufficient coping mechanisms for stress and challenges may result in heightened emotional exhaustion.
- Unrealistic expectations – Holding unrealistic expectations about one's abilities or the idealized image of motherhood can lead to disappointment and stress.
- Limited self-identity outside motherhood – Mothers who struggle to maintain a sense of self outside their role as caregivers may experience a loss of personal identity.
- Financial strain – Economic challenges and the stress of providing for a family can contribute to a mother's fatigue.

Recognizing and addressing these psychological factors often involves self-reflection, setting realistic expectation, seeking support, and developing coping strategies to manage stress and exhaustion effectively. It is important for individuals experiencing these challenges to seek support, whether through friends, family or professional counseling. Addressing these psychological factors early can help prevent long-term negative impacts on mental health.

Family and Social factors: For working women, the two most significant facets of their lives are work and family. In many nations, balancing work and family responsibilities has become a crucial challenge for individuals and families. The lives of working mothers are stressful in many different ways. Every day they have to deal with stress of jobs, families, and homes. Zarra-Nezhad, *et al.*, (2010)^[5] examines the relationship between occupational stress and family difficulties in 250 married working women in Iran. Results show positive correlation between occupational

stress and family difficulties in working women. Addressing these family related issues often involves open communication, setting realistic expectations, sharing responsibilities, and fostering a supportive and understanding family environment. Seeking professional help, such as family counseling, can also be beneficial in resolving these challenges. There are several reasons why work and family life become out of balance. Some reasons are includes:

- Lack of support – if family members particularly a spouse or extended family, fail to provide adequate emotional or practical support, it can exacerbate feeling of exhaustion and stress.
- Unequal distribution of responsibilities – When there's an imbalance in parenting and household responsibilities within the family, the mother may bear a disproportionate burden, leading to increased strain.
- Communication Issues – Ineffective communication within the family can hinder understanding of the mother's needs and challenges, creating additional stress.
- Unrealistic Expectations – Family members having unrealistic expectations of the mother's role or setting overly high standards can contribute to feelings of inadequacy.
- Conflict or Tension – Family conflicts or tension can heighten stress levels for the mother, especially if there's a lack of resolution or support. Lu (2007) [3] conducted a study in Taiwan for examine work-family conflict and effects of organizational support among 441 working women. They found that work-family conflict was strongly associated with high level of stress, severe physical illness, lower family and job satisfaction.
- Financial Strain – If the family is experiencing financial difficulties, it can add to the overall stress for the mother who may be managing multiple responsibilities.
- Lack of social support – insufficient support from partner is one of the most important factors of depleted mother syndrome in working mothers. Alarifi and Basahal (2023) [1] found that working women needs most professional support followed by practical support in the household activities, childcare and parenting responsibilities. Family of friends can intensify the challenges of parenting and contribute to feelings of depletion.
- Cultural Expectations – Societal exceptions regarding the role of mothers and traditional gender roles may create additional pressures and stress.
- Work-life balance – Balancing work and family responsibilities can be challenging, especially if there is limited flexibility or support in the workplace.
- Financial strain – Economic challenges and the stress of providing for the family can contribute to the overall burden experienced by mothers.
- Stigma and judgment – Societal judgment or stigma related to parenting choices can contribute to stress and a sense of inadequacy.
- Inequality in domestic responsibilities – If there is an unequal distribution of domestic tasks; mothers may bear a disproportionate burden, affecting their well-being.

Addressing family and social factors often involves building a supportive network, fostering open communication with partners and family, and advocating for changes in societal attitudes and workplace policies to create a more supportive environment for mothers.

Coping Strategies

The role of a spouse is crucial in addressing and mitigating the challenges associated with depleted mother syndrome among working mothers. Supportive spouse can play several roles. By providing emotional support, reassurance, understanding, and empathy can help alleviate the emotional burden on the mother. As well as assisting with daily tasks, childcare responsibilities, and household chores can lighten the workload reducing stress for the working mother. Effective, open and honest communication also allows spouses to discuss challenges, share responsibilities, and work together to find solution. Spouse should encourage and support the mother in taking breaks, and engaging in self-care activities so it helps mothers to prioritize her well-being. Equitably sharing parenting duties or responsibilities fosters a more balanced partnership and reduces the overall work load on the working mothers. Spouse should recognize that parenting and household responsibilities are shared and adapting to changing circumstances. It should be flexible and based on teamwork.

The role of family can influence the development of alleviation of challenges associated with depleted mother syndrome. Studies show that family and work conflict can be reduced when employees have family support, social support, and as well as organizational support (Michel *et al.*, 2011) [4]. Family dynamics and support play pivotal roles in depleted mother syndrome. A family that provides supportive environment, emotional support, understanding and encouragement can help mitigate the stress and exhaustion experienced by a working mother. When family members, including extended family, share in childcare and household responsibilities, it reduces the burden on the working mother. Open and effective communication within the family allows mothers to express their needs, challenges, and feelings, fostering understanding and support. Families should respect the mother's need for personal time and self-care contributes to a healthier and more balanced family dynamic. Acknowledging and appreciating the mother's effort and contributions foster a positive environment and helps counter feeling of inadequacy. Families that are flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances can better navigate the demands of parenting, reducing overall stress. Cultural and societal influences within the family can impact expectations and attitudes toward motherhood, influencing a mother's sense of well-being.

Conclusion

By creating a supportive family environment, addressing communication challenges, and sharing responsibilities, families can play a vital role in preventing or alleviating the factors associated with depleted mother syndrome among working mothers. By actively participating in the challenges of parenting and maintaining a supportive and collaborative relationship, spouses can also significantly contribute to alleviating the effects of depleted mother syndrome among working mothers. It's important to note that not all working mothers face the same challenges, as individual circumstances, support systems, and workplace

environments can vary widely. Strategies such as effective communication, time management, and seeking support can help alleviate some of the difficulties associated with being a working mother. Additionally, societal attitudes and workplace policies that support work-life balance and gender equality can contribute to creating a more supportive environment for working mothers.

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