

Stretched Too Thin

How WORKING MOMS
Can LOSE *the* GUILT,
WORK SMARTER, *and* THRIVE

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*To my mom, Debbie LoCoco,
one of the hardest-working women I know. I love you.*

*In memory of my grandmothers, Marilyn LoCoco
and Ruth Schim. Thank you for always believing in me.*

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Introduction

One Saturday in mid-September, my younger son, Ezra, and my daughter, Adeline, were playing with building blocks together on the circle rug in our living room. This rug sits in front of a bay window and some bookshelves and is where the kids spend many hours playing with their toys. A few Cheerios were sprinkled on the rug, spilled from breakfast a few hours earlier, and the washing machine was churning in the nearby hall closet. I was sitting on the couch, responding to a few work emails and catching up from being out of the office the Friday before. As I glanced over at them playing, I took a breath and smiled, not wanting to forget the beauty and simplicity of the moment.

To outsiders looking in, the scene would have appeared to be an ordinary one in the home of a very regular family. And they would have been right. But to me, I saw something more.

My kids . . . playing and happy.

Chores . . . getting done.

A few moments free . . . to do what I needed to do.

That scene captured, in part, what thriving looks like in my own life. Your scene likely looks different, but the feeling is the same. You know the feeling I'm referring to—the one when everything (or almost everything) feels right in your world. You feel at peace. You feel happy. You feel alive.

A few weeks later, with Halloween around the corner, I called my husband, Matthew, on my lunch break to talk about the forthcoming weekend. On deck was a postseason soccer party for my eldest son, Elias, and book writing for me (I had ten days until my deadline). I also really wanted to go to the pumpkin patch, but doing so was going to be difficult because the farm was only open on Saturdays from 10 to 5 and Sundays from 11 to 5. Our littlest napped during the afternoon, and the soccer party was going to run during most of the pre-naptime prime hours. As we wrestled with our options, I started to cry.

Yes, I was crying over wanting to go to the pumpkin patch.

For me, the pumpkin patch represented family (something we could all do together), the kickoff to fall and Halloween (one of my favorite times of the year), and tradition (we go every year). Because of my work schedule, I had already missed many traditions and activities, and that realization left me weeping on the phone with my husband while sitting in the parking lot of Panera. In response to my breakdown, my husband gently and patiently assured, “We can make this work, honey.” And he was right. We did. I wrote early in the morning. Then we went to the pumpkin patch and the party, my toddler got his nap, and I completed my work. I even had time to craft in the evening.

These two examples reflect the yin and yang of being a working mom. Some weeks we have flexibility, and all seems right with the world. Other weeks we are crying from stress, overwhelm, and “missing out.”

As working moms, we are constantly making choices about how and in what to invest our time. The more we can do that’s not rooted in guilt and comparison but is instead an output of joy and love, the better life is.

Working motherhood is not easy, but it has taught me a great deal. When I take time to practice intentionality, really listen to my family members, take care of myself, and love the work I do, I find myself thriving. Sure, dishes may be left on the counter and the laundry baskets may never be empty, but that's okay. I have systems in place to ensure we never run out of diapers and toilet paper, and eventually, all the projects get completed—even if the timeline isn't always what I'd like it to be.

Thriving as a working mom involves knowing who you are and loving the people closest to you well. And that's what I want you to find too.

I believe work and motherhood can coexist in a positive, invigorating manner. Yet for too many women, that's not the case. For the past eighteen months, I've explored what it means to be a working mom by talking with moms all over the country to learn what brings them joy and their struggles. The resounding refrain I heard over and over again was this: *I'm stretched too thin*. If that sounds like your story, this book is going to help you make positive changes. I want working moms to be able to say with pride, "I love my family. I do great work. I'm thriving."

This book is a permission slip to reprioritize yourself, make changes to your day-to-day life, and embrace a new normal that is free of feeling stretched too thin. In the following chapters, I will unpack the greatest struggles we working moms have, including boundaries with our work; fostering meaningful relationships with our spouses, kids, and friends; practicing self-care; and managing our homes. Frankly, every one of these topics could be a book! But in the space available, I'll offer insights specifically geared toward the working-mom experience that will equip you to do life a bit differently.

The mission is to help you recognize that contentment can

be cultivated amid the busyness of life. Happiness and joy are yours for the taking every single day. Yes, living this way takes intention, dedication, and drive. But you already have all of that. Each of us was born with an innate desire to live well.

I know you will be inspired by the wisdom shared in the following pages from working moms across America who are just like you. Their stories and insights will motivate you to become the woman you yearn to be.

Remember as you read that the journey toward thriving is just that—a journey. It can be messy and complicated. But that doesn't mean you can't still prosper and be joyful.

I love how my friend Jyl, who runs a successful network of social media influencers, puts it: "Don't be afraid to fail forward. I believe one of the biggest keys to happiness is growth. The more we grow and reach our potential (which means trying, falling, but failing forward so we grow), the more we increase our resiliency, our strength, and improve our talents. All of this increases our happiness, because we are progressing, reaching our true potential, and moving forward. As we do this, we will be an example to our kids and everyone will be happier."¹

Struggle, guilt, and failure are part of the journey, but these experiences are not the destination and should not define your life's story. You can be a working mom who isn't overwhelmed by her to-do list or constantly feeling as if she is failing at everything. You can and should be able to see the value in the work you do, appreciate your unique contributions to your family's life, and look at life with positivity.

This book isn't the answer to everything—or even to most of the things. But it is a guide to help you stop feeling stretched too thin. That doesn't have to be your norm. So let's bounce back, find our rhythm, and cultivate a thriving life of contentment.

ONE

Evaluating Your Present

Do you ever wonder how you survived certain seasons of life because they were so busy that you could hardly breathe? Maybe you are in one of those seasons right now. A few years ago, I lived that way for an entire year. And while I lived to tell about it, I never want to be stretched that thin again.

In 2015, in the span of twelve months, I delivered my third healthy child, released two books, blogged for multiple big brands, and engaged with tens of thousands of people who followed me on social media. I also worked a full-time, nine-to-five job. In the same year, my husband signed a children's book deal and traveled overseas with a major media company.

While much of it felt like a dream (New baby! Book releases! Overseas travel!), the year was also incredibly taxing. I was exhausted, burned-out, crabby, and not really living life but merely surviving. I would say to myself, *Just get through today, this week, this month, next month*—but there was no end in sight. Our house was a mess. I was yelling at our kids. And I hated myself.

I was crazy busy and stretched too thin.

One Sunday evening that November we had some friends over for dinner and to watch *The Walking Dead*. After they left, I was in the kitchen, scraping leftover Pioneer Woman potato soup into some CorningWare, when my husband, Matthew, half teasing/half serious, suggested, “Why don’t you start lunches while you’re in here?”

I snapped back a bit too quickly, “No, I have work to do.”

He sighed. “When are you not working? You never stop. You are missing out on your kids.”

“Don’t say that,” I replied.

“Why not? Someone has to say it to you.”

“Soon,” I said. “Soon, I won’t have so much work.” I was, after all, releasing that second book, and the holiday season was a busy time for my blog. But that voice inside my head told me I was just making excuses. I was always busy. I knew Matthew was right.

While I wanted to assure myself that things were going to be different soon, I knew things would not really change because I always found or created more work. For me to have less work, I needed to draw that proverbial line in the sand and fully commit to doing less.

A month later, on New Year’s Eve, I wrote these words across the top of a goal-setting journal: SLOW DOWN. That was what I wanted for the next year and for the rest of my life.

That didn’t mean I was going to sit around and do nothing. It simply meant I was going to evaluate how I was spending my time. Writing that phrase was my proclamation that I would seek out a more intentional life.

My perspective has shifted a great deal since that crazy year. While my life is still busy, I am not working at the same breakneck speed. And instead of being stretched too thin, I am content and satisfied with my life. But getting here took some intentionality.

Examining Your Present

The journey to thriving as a working mom must begin with an honest look at your present circumstances and the pressures that threaten to or already have overwhelmed you. Where are you feeling stretched to the breaking point?

We live in an era of speed. The norm has become to get things done faster, to move faster, to go faster. Our society has normalized nonstop activity. Because of this busyness, we often feel we don't have the room to make intentional choices about how we spend our time or to live true to ourselves. Instead of living well, we are living stretched too thin.

I know that my can't-breathe-because-I'm-too-busy experience a few years ago is one that is relatable to other working moms because, during the summer of 2016, I surveyed two thousand of them, asking one question: What is your biggest struggle as a working mom?¹ As you might imagine, the answers I received were vulnerable, honest, and, when read between the lines, often filled with pain, emotion, or exhaustion.

Here is a sampling of what these working moms, from all walks of life and professions, had to say:

The hardest thing I struggle with is being stretched too thin and finding time just for myself in the midst of parenting, being a good spouse, and nurturing that relationship.

I'm stretched too thin, so I feel like I'm not being the best mother, wife, friend, daughter, and business owner. I feel as though trying to make time for everything is impossible. It is difficult to give 100 percent to any one thing.

Since becoming a mom four and a half years ago, I've struggled with losing my identity. While I love being a mom, I gave up all my

hobbies in pursuit of balancing work and family life. My marriage seems to be an afterthought. I haven't worked out consistently in years. Overall, I'm stretched too thin, but I cram in as much as I can in the four hours a day I see my kids awake. It's depressing to lose your identity, lose your body, have every relationship changed (marriage, friends, parents, coworkers), and it is not something anyone can prepare you for.

Lately, I feel like I've been stretched too thin in all areas of life and that there truly is no balance. If I try to give more attention to one area, another area suffers, and I feel like all the areas need my full attention, which can be quite stressful. I also feel like I give so much of myself at work that I'm tapped out by the time I'm at home and need to give my kids attention. Even though I have a supportive husband who does help out around the house, many of the home management tasks, especially cooking and keeping up with appointments, still fall to me, and I often feel like I'm working two full-time jobs! The area that I neglect the most is definitely self-care, and when I do try to make a diligent effort to include it, it often feels like one more "task" in my already busy schedule, which adds to my stress.

What stood out to you in those statements? As I read those heartfelt responses, I couldn't help but notice all the ways women expressed being *stretched too thin*. The phrase was like a drumbeat. Work. Kids. Activities. Church. The list of reasons women felt this way went on and on. It was also clear that many of these women had stopped taking care of themselves in the midst of their busyness, finding it impossible to make the time. Can you relate?

Living stretched too thin is the norm for many working mothers, but it doesn't have to be. We truly can live with purpose, experience love, and be content with both a family and a career. Throughout this book, we are going to look at the areas in which

working moms frequently feel overwhelmed and discuss practical ways to make things better. You are going to find many ideas in this book. As you read, remember that not everything is going to be applicable to you at this time. Moreover, it is impossible to implement *all* the ideas and strategies you'll find here. Give yourself permission to be choosy, and read with an eye for what will work in *your* life during *this* season. Avoiding being stretched too thin is not about overhauling everything. Instead, it's about recognizing what changes you can make to help you thrive on a day-to-day basis, then making conscious choices to make those changes a reality.

Taking Inventory

Before changes can happen, it is important to take inventory of your present in a very eyes-wide-open manner. No one else's story is exactly like yours. So to make the principles in this book apply to your life, your input is vital.

What does life look like for you right now? Are there things on your schedule that you dread every day, every week, and/or every month? The working mother experience includes some unique challenges related to responsibilities, parenting, and practicing self-care. You need to own both the good and the bad, not sugar-coating any of it. At the end of each chapter, you will find questions to consider and journal about. For this process to be effective, you will want to be detailed in your inventory. Think of the major areas of your life, such as parenting, work, marriage, and self-care, and really evaluate your investment in each and how much time you spend on them. Don't skim past this important work.

You might be thinking, *I know my life. I know what's in it, and writing things down isn't going to be helpful.* But seeing all the things written down in one place is incredibly eye-opening. By

having a clear understanding of your present, you can effectively change your future.

Begin your inventory of the present by looking at the mental load you're carrying as a working mom.

Understand Your Mental Load

For many working moms with young children, summer brings a whole new set of challenges to manage—many dealing with what to do with the kids. If your job doesn't allow for a lot of flexibility, summer camp can be a great option. My kids love camp, and I have learned to embrace their summer schedule instead of feeling guilty for not spending endless days at the pool with them. That said, summer camp planning is a burdensome task that begins months in advance.

Where I live, many of the best summer camps fill up in February and March, which means I need to start planning right after Christmas. Yes, it's as crazy as it sounds. I remember the first year when I had to schedule camps for two of my three kids. I spent lunch breaks at work researching camps, using a blank calendar printout to pencil in schedules and plan. Cobbling together camps that my art-loving daughter and outdoor-loving son would like was a challenge, but I managed to find a few that I could enroll them both in. This was a huge win because one camp meant for much simpler drop-offs and pickups.

One of the camps both kids wanted to enroll in opened registration at 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday in February. This camp typically sold out right away, so I made sure to have our profiles filled out in advance and set an alarm on my phone.

As luck would have it, our toddler woke up sick the morning of camp registration. My husband had an appointment that Saturday, so I found myself with all three kids at the pediatrician's

office for a 9:15 a.m. appointment. This was not how I had planned our Saturday, but I did what anyone would do—I brought my laptop with me to the appointment. Our doctor diagnosed an ear infection and confirmed the pharmacy she would send the antibiotics to. I then said thank you and asked if I could stay in the examination room for a few minutes to submit a camp registration. She laughed, remembering the days when she was doing the same for her kids.

Sick kids.

Busy schedules.

Medicine.

Summer camp registration in February.

Just a typical day of managing all the things! Tell me you can relate. You see, many working moms are also their home's manager. In my case, registering for summer camp was one of the many items on my to-do list for that Saturday. You could likely replace summer camps with a dozen other examples of your own. Mothers tend to be the ones who oversee household tasks, delineating what needs to be done by whom, etc. Sometimes family members become so used to this norm that they are dependent on receiving direction from the mother. Moreover, she is then forced to carry the bulk of the household's mental load.

This “mental load” that a person carries is defined by work-life balance coach Marie Levey-Pabst as the “largely invisible work of remembering and noticing.”² Because this load is carried inside our heads and isn't visible in the same way going to an office is, we often don't recognize it as real work. We lump it in as “what moms do,” mentally reducing its significance and burden.

When I first heard this term—mental load—I wanted to jump up and down because, finally, the story of my life has a name!

So, what is your mental load? Some examples might include the following:

- awareness of your children’s health and wellness (Did they nap today? When is their next physical? Are they still seated next to the bully at school?)
- managing family and friend relationships (scheduling get-togethers, attending athletic events, etc.)
- noticing household tasks that need to be done (burned-out lightbulbs that need to be changed, chores, maintenance projects, etc.)
- planning meals for the week, and creating grocery lists
- taking care of your family’s finances (paying bills, managing bank accounts, etc.)
- researching and planning family vacations and special events (ordering tickets, booking flights, etc.)
- shopping for birthdays and holidays
- recognizing when your children’s clothes are too small, when it is time to reorganize and shop for seasons, etc.

Carrying a heavy mental load is exhausting. Marie notes, “While everyone has a mental load, women carry a disproportionately high amount of the mental load in a family.”³ And when you add work to the mix, you have a working mother whose mind is always in overdrive.

Recognizing what is a part of your mental load and determining how to release some of its weight is critical to feeling less stretched too thin. Some of these things you should let go of, while others you can and should delegate to others. I’m fortunate that my husband is always willing to pitch in and help. I find that

I simply need to ask, particularly when I am feeling unequally yoked with home tasks.

Identify Your Core Values

Also important to understanding your present is identifying what you value, because living in a way that aligns with your values is a choice. Living stretched too thin often means you are running on autopilot, going from one thing to the next. You aren't mindful of the things you are investing in. Taking time to identify your core values can help you shift where you are putting your energy.

What is a core value? A core value is something that is deeply important to you. It spans your roles as professional, wife, mother, friend, and person.

The way we live showcases what we value. If you are a person who values friendship, you will be a person who invests in others. If you are a person who values family, you will spend quality time with those you love.

Do you know what your values are? Can you name them?

For most women who are feeling stretched too thin, that feeling comes as a result of busyness in their lives. If that is true for you, do you value busyness? My guess is probably not, despite the fact that your life may reflect otherwise. Recognizing that busyness is a value you are showcasing is the first step to shifting your mentality and taking steps to live a life that reflects what you truly value.

Separate the Need-to-Do from the Nice-to-Do

My guess is that, since you are reading this book, you feel the tension of juggling many roles and responsibilities and desperately wanting to do everything well. Unfortunately, to-do lists are

often overwhelming, and there is only one you. Is it any wonder that life tends to feel as if you're always running on a hamster wheel? I don't know about you, but I've often stared at the various things I've put on my calendar and wondered, *How is it possible to do it all?*

The answer? It's not. We have twenty-four hours in a day and one life to live well. That said, I believe you can live a full, even busy, life without the cycle of busyness controlling you. I know this sounds impossible, but stick with me. If you intentionally choose and control the busyness you accept in your life, that busyness is not a burden like the busyness that overtakes your life and controls you instead. Wholeness, peace, and happiness come when you are living with intention.

You need to regularly evaluate the need-to-dos versus the nice-to-dos to ensure you are living fulfilled. If your life is cluttered by unnecessary things, trimming the fat, so to speak, can have wildly positive repercussions.

To do this, your perspective needs to change from doing *all* the things to doing only the things *that really matter*. This subtle shift takes time and practice, but it changes everything for the better.

Prepare for the Unexpected

Sometimes we are living stretched too thin, with days heavily booked and deadlines looming, and then the unexpected happens. An illness. A death. A major household expense that we didn't expect. A school project that is due tomorrow that was forgotten. Whatever the cause, the result is a tailspin of additional stress and shifting of priorities.

I have had more than my fair share of these situations, and they often happen during my busiest seasons. The worst experience happened last year when I was traveling for work and had

an unexpected health scare. For several days, I pushed through the pain, thinking that Advil and some other over-the-counter medications would help me get over it. Eventually, the pain was too great, and I had to cut my trip short and book an early flight home. My husband immediately took me to the ER, and twelve hours later, I was in surgery. The recovery took weeks, and it hit right during a season when I was already stretched too thin. I remember crying and asking, *Why is this happening right now?* I needed to work. I was supposed to host a baby shower that weekend that would have to be canceled. And I was concerned about the financial strain of the health-care bills.

My nurse gently reminded me that during the healing process, I could not immediately jump back into things at one hundred miles an hour. I needed to slowly build up my strength and give myself grace. This unexpected slowdown was a reminder that many things that cause us to be stretched too thin should not rule our lives in the way that they do. If something takes more time to complete than we originally planned, we will still be okay.

The busyness of everyday life doesn't always allow for flexibility, but if we can work toward not scheduling our time without breathing room and allowing for more space in our days, these unexpected hurdles will be less overwhelming.

My friend Sara passed away a few years ago. As someone with a debilitating disease that forced her to be homebound, she knew better than anyone the challenges life can bring. She once wrote in a daily devotional, "I want you to be fully awake to the blessings in your life and not miss a moment. Take them in and savor them in your senses as if you might lose them tomorrow."⁴ We should remember her reminder to live fully awake when we feel overwhelmed by the unexpected.

Reflections on Your Present

What Is Your Present?

To move from living stretched too thin to thriving, you must first understand your present. Running on autopilot is no way to live. You must assess your mental load and recognize its burden. You need to be able to clearly articulate your core values so you can make choices that reflect those values. Living with a value-based perspective allows you to say no to nice-to-do things and yes to need-to-do things. Take time using the questions that follow to assess your present, with the knowledge that what you write could change your life.

What is your current job? _____

How many hours do you work each week? _____

How happy are you with your job? _____

On the next page is a grid containing areas in which working moms commonly feel stretched. Make notes about each area as it relates to your own life and any tensions that are present. For example, in the marriage/relationship box, you might write, “My husband and I both work full time. We have two small children, and after they go to bed, we are both tired and want time to individually catch up on our favorite TV shows, projects, etc. Consequently, we aren’t getting the quality time we need.”

Evaluating Your Present

Work	
Children	
Marriage/ Relationship	
Home	
Friendships	
Self-care	
Activities (i.e., church, school, community)	

Does your life have other areas of tension that need to be addressed? If so, please note them below. _____

When you think about your mental load, what is a burden to you? _____

Do you think your priorities are in order, or have they gotten out of whack? Why? _____

What are your core values? _____

In what ways are you investing in those values? In what ways are you spending time that doesn't relate to your values?

What's one change you can make to live in a way that better reflects what you truly value? _____
