

Juggling Your Many Selves

When it seems as if you're constantly shifting gears between parent, partner, and worker, it can be hard to feel fully present in any of those roles. But there are ways to slow down and make the transitions easier.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, Ph.D.**



SAMANTHA FELT she could hardly keep track of all her job descriptions—mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend, employee, volunteer. But the reason she came to me for help was the emotional toll of trying to do them all in the same day, and even within the same hour. One minute she felt she needed to be snuggly with her daughter, the next, calm and confident at work, and then connected with her husband. She said, “I can’t switch gears that fast!”

Like her, many parents feel exhausted

by all the mental shifts in a given day. However, we often don’t even realize when we’re switching gears—or that this may be the reason for our grumpy moods or marital spats. Samantha and her husband, Dan, had a strong relationship, but she knew she’d been getting snarky with him. “When he asked if I’d called the plumber yet, I literally blew up and said, ‘You do it for once!’” she told me. “I had agreed to do it, but with my daughter whining and work emails to send, Dan suddenly seemed like my worst enemy.”

“Switching gears” can mean multiple things—shunting not only between roles such as parent, employee, and spouse but also between different types of activities (watching *Frozen II*, dealing with an after-hours work crisis, slipping into bed with your partner)—all of which can involve transitioning from one mindset to the next. We each have different capacities for multitasking and handling unexpected situations. Samantha realized she tended to be a perfectionist, and having to juggle her responsibilities

made her feel as if she wasn't succeeding 100 percent in all her roles. Once she acknowledged that, we were able to work together on crafting more realistic expectations for herself and others.

If you can adopt strategies for feeling less stressed by the inevitable transitions in your day and the competing demands on your attention, it will translate into more calm and kindness with your loved ones. And if your partner commits to doing the same, you'll be on your way to smoother gear shifts as a couple and a happier home life.

● **Build in deep-breathing breaks.**

Brandon was a loving dad who worked long days, commuted, walked the dog, and did the dishes. As soon as he flopped on the couch, his sons wanted to wrestle or jump on the trampoline with him. "I feel guilty if I don't want to play," he told me. "They'll only be little for a short time." He enjoyed playing with his boys—he just needed a break first. My advice to parents in the same boat is to recognize the power of a short mental and physical space between activities to help you switch gears. Give yourself five or ten minutes of "breathing room" if you need it.

And when you take a break, remember to breathe. It may seem obvious, but most of us forget to do it. If you're tense, your breathing gets shallow, which contributes to feelings of anxiety. Many people practice yoga and meditation, which focus on breathing and are hugely beneficial when it comes to finding calm. But at any time, taking a deep breath can help you relax so you can turn toward your kids and partner with more openness and warmth.

● **Get better at asking for (and giving) help.**

Moving from one role to another often requires a change in approach. "It's hard to switch gears from mom to lover," Samantha said. "My mind's still thinking about to-dos when I'm supposed to shut it off and pay attention to Dan." This is one of the many areas in couple

life where it pays to become more comfortable asking each other for help. In fact, psychologists call it healthy dependency. We may need practical help ("Can you stir the soup on the stove?") or help changing our emotional state. I told Samantha, "Don't put too much pressure on yourself to focus on Dan. Start by asking for what you need." It put her in a better mood if, during the early evening, Dan listened sympathetically while she talked about the frustrations of her day. Once they were in the bedroom, a back rub helped her unwind and feel



more relaxed with him. The more lovingly you can suggest to your partner how they can support you, the better the request is likely to be received.

● **Schedule a few hours off.**

Sometimes the fatigue associated with switching gears is hard to distinguish from gloom about the daily grind. There's the old saying, "A change is as good as a rest." And it bears repeating, because restoring energy isn't only about getting a good night's sleep—it's also about experiencing something new or different that truly restores your spirits. Make an agreement with your partner to schedule one weekend day when each of you can take a few hours off to switch up your routine. If you can get child care

and do something as a couple, great. Even taking a walk in a different part of town, watching a new kind of movie, or looking at fresh scenery can help you reenter family life with a renewed perspective.

● **Relax your expectations.**

We all want to be the best caretaker we can be for an ailing parent, the most attentive partner to our spouse, the most helpful parent to our child, and the most competent employee. It's a painful reality that we can't always do our best at everything. But we make the pain worse by engaging in negative chatter inside our mind. We may focus on someone else as the problem ("If only my mom weren't so needy"), but just as often, we direct it at ourselves ("I'm not loving enough toward my mom"). Try to use self-compassion to interrupt that process. Allow yourself to think, "The world won't fall apart if I don't do everything I'm supposed to do today. I can accept doing a little less."

● **Remember that family life is a work in progress.**

Figuring out what works for your unique family is one of the most important things you can do for your own mental health and happiness as a couple. If you often have nothing left to give after 7 P.M., come up with work-arounds to help avoid predictable moments of gear-shifting stress. A "fend for yourself" dinner night, for example, can teach your older kids some kitchen skills while giving you a bit of a break. As our kids grow, certain aspects of parenting become easier, others more challenging. That's true of marriage too. The roles and responsibilities we are switching between also change. If you can maintain an attitude of creative problem solving, you'll take more satisfaction in the evolving process of managing your many roles. ✖



Daphne de Marneffe, Ph.D., is a psychologist and the author of *Maternal Desire* and *The Rough Patch: Marriage and the Art of Living Together*. Visit her at daphnedemarneffe.com.