



# How to spot, and address, inequality at home

Is the dynamic you share with your partner truly equal?

Writing | Hannah Beckett-Pratt

**I**nequality impacts relationships, negatively affecting both partners. Despite this, it is extremely common, and tends to centre around the division of domestic responsibilities, childcare, and emotional labour. The latter refers to the intrapsychic burden that one partner often experiences, where thinking and feeling are affected, as well as behaviour. For example, one partner may be aware that their child will need to enrol at school a year or two before they're due to start, or notice that dinner needs picking up for the evening. When these things don't occur to the other partner, it can begin to feel like you're on different pages.

Relationships that lack this kind of equity can lead to stress, guilt, and dissatisfaction for both

partners. It may be obvious that the partner who does most of the work is under-benefitting and prone to resentment, but research has also shown that the over-benefitting partner is often also dissatisfied; experiencing pity, guilt, and shame.

Sound familiar? Here, we're exploring how to spot and address household inequality.

## 1. If you stop, the chores stop

This is where most people are likely to give in and just do the task. But by doing so, you're taking the responsibility away from your partner, and reinforcing the inequality. It can be really helpful to think of you and your partner together, facing the issue of inequality, rather than 'me VS you'. This redistributes the power and

responsibility between you, and diffuses tension and conflict. You could actively discuss this with your partner, or make suggestions such as: "I'm going to start cooking in half an hour, could you unload the dishwasher beforehand? Then we'll have more time to be together after we've eaten."

## 2. Pay attention to language

When we are feeling frustrated, we are likely to use language that blames our partner for what they are not doing, and that makes us look like the victim. However, rather than achieving the equality we seek, this usually puts both partners in a defensive position which ignites arguments. Take ownership of your feelings, and ask directly for what you need. This might sound like: "I'm feeling really stressed and need a moment to regain my energy. Will you watch the kids for an hour while I take a bath?"

Using language that doesn't infantilise your partner is also helpful, for example: "Will you do X?" Or, "When can you do X?" Rather than, "Can you?" Or, "Might you be able to...?"

## 3. Spotting weaponised incompetence

Claiming we don't know how to do something to get out of doing it is a common game that permeates domestic inequality. Sitting down and allocating responsibilities that each partner feels capable of doing is one

clear way to address this. If your partner says they don't know how to do something that you really need them to start helping with (e.g. tying up your daughter's hair before football club), ask them what it is that will allow them to do it. If they don't know, rather than getting angry and doing it yourself, suggest a neutral way they can solve their own problem – for example, following a YouTube tutorial.

If weaponised incompetence is becoming a regular feature of your relationship, seek couples therapy to help you both manage it before it becomes passive-aggressive.

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## 4. Consider your own role in the inequality

This can be difficult to reflect on, but the game of inequality has two players. If you have both spoken about how to achieve domestic equality, or have designated chores, then you must allow your partner the chance to do them in their own way. You may wish they did it differently, or maybe you could do it better yourself, but denying them the opportunity to change can lead to learned helplessness – where

one partner stops doing things because they're frequently undermined by the other partner beating them to it, or re-doing it out of impatience.

You might also check your own internalised stereotypes here – are you a female partner taking on more because you believe this is what you need to do as a good wife or mother?

## 5. Assess your mental load

Rather than tit-for-tat, this is about creating a long-term sense of fairness. It might be that one of you is having a stressful month at work, so the other one does a bit more at home during this time, and is OK with that. Assessing your own capacity regularly during the week can help this process: how much energy do you have left for the day, and where do you want to spend it? Being honest with yourself, and your partner, will give them a better chance to empathise with you, and want to help you out. If you can do the same when they need it, you are less likely to fall into the trap of keeping score. ■



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