

THE WHOLE SELF LIFESTYLE™ FOR WORKING PARENTS

A PRACTICAL 4-STEP FRAMEWORK TO
DEFEAT BURNOUT AND ESCAPE
SURVIVAL MODE FOR GOOD

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This work depicts actual events in the life of the author as truthfully as recollection permits or can be verified by research. Occasionally, dialogue consistent with the character or nature of the person speaking has been supplemented. All persons within are actual individuals; there are no composite characters.

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A NOTE TO THE READER

Hi there! Thank you for checking out this sample chapter of my book, *The Whole SELF Lifestyle for Working Parents: A Practical 4-Step Framework to Defeat Burnout and Escape Survival Mode for Good*. If you enjoy this chapter and would like to purchase the whole book, you can find it on [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), and many other booksellers.

For more information, visit The Argenal Institute website at www.argenalinstitute.com. Enjoy this sample chapter!

Warmly,

Sarah

SAMPLE

MY 'I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE' WORKING MOM MOMENT

It was just an ordinary February afternoon in the suburbs of San Francisco. The weather was a comfortable and sunny 70 degrees. My husband, Joey, and I were out at lunch, one of our first dates since our son, Beckett, was born six months earlier. It was a beautiful afternoon and we were having a great time. I certainly didn't expect my life to change course as dramatically as it did that day.

Joey and I were deep in the fog of new parenthood. I had just returned to my job as a litigation support analyst at a law firm in San Francisco two months earlier, during the Christmas holidays. It wasn't a bad time to go back to work after a generous five-month maternity leave. Most people were on vacation, so the pace of the office was slow. I got to ease back into the relentless routine of sleepless nights with the baby, a grueling and unpredictable train commute, and around-the-clock demands from frantic attorneys. As a family, we were adjusting to our new reality of diaper bags and daycare drop-offs and pickups. Joey and I were slowly coming to terms with our new identity as working parents.

As soon as the new year arrived, my co-workers became antsy to have a break after covering for me while I was "on vacation," as they called it. Work heated up fast as we headed into January. My schedule went into overdrive.

Here's what a typical day looked like for us in those early months, once we were really into the swing of things:

- **5:00 AM:** Beckett wakes up for the day. He is definitely not going back to sleep. I bring him into our bed to nurse him and snuggle before we all have to face the day.
- **5:30 AM:** I hand Beckett over to Joey and hop in the shower. Joey gets Beckett dressed and ready for daycare.
- **5:45 AM:** Add last-minute bottles and other accouterments to the diaper bag for Beckett's 12-hour day at daycare.
- **6:15 AM:** Joey and Beckett head out the door (Joey and I split drop-off and pick-up duties). I have 30 minutes of peace to apply my makeup, style my hair, and get

dressed. As soon as I look presentable, I grab my purse and coffee tumbler and race to the train station.

- **7:00 AM:** I snag one of the last seats on the train. I catch up on work emails and mentally plan my morning while I sip coffee. Sometimes I sneak in a podcast or article too.
- **8:00 AM:** Once I'm in my office, I hit the ground running with a list of matters that need my immediate attention.
- **12:00 PM - 1:00 PM** (*whenever I can sneak it in*): I hide in the lactation room with my laptop. I simultaneously eat lunch, pump milk for my little guy, and work.
- **4:15 PM:** Glance at the clock and realize I have five minutes to catch the next train home. I grab my expressed milk, laptop and purse, and sprint down the street to the train station. On the days I make it in time, I grab a seat and keep working. On the days I miss the train, I have to wait another 20 minutes for the next one, knowing I'll have to stand for the hour-long train ride home and will inevitably arrive after my son's daycare center closes.
- **6:00 PM:** Pick up my little guy from daycare. It feels like he's grown three inches since I saw him that morning (I actively suppress the mom guilt). He falls asleep in the car on the way home, sabotaging my plans for a smooth bedtime routine.
- **6:30 PM:** Drop everything in the kitchen so I can finally nurse my beautiful and snuggly son. I relish 20 minutes of calm, reveling in his sweet baby breath and soft fingers.
- **7:00 PM:** Bath time. Lotion. PJs. Read. Snuggle. Nurse one more time and get in as many kisses as I can. Wave hello to that stranger I used to recognize as my husband when he gets home (a.k.a. Dad).
- **7:30 PM:** Put my son in his crib, drowsy but awake, just like all the books recommend. I cross my fingers that tonight will be the night he thinks to himself, "*Okay, I see what they're doing here. I'll just snuggle with my favorite lovey and hit the hay. Got it!*" No such luck.
- **7:45 PM:** Curl up on my bed with my timer, counting down the seconds until I can rescue my little guy who is screaming bloody murder. I imagine he's thinking:

"What the hell?! I haven't seen you ALL DAY, and now you're abandoning me in this room. What are you thinking? Get in here and pick me up, pronto!"

- **8:00 PM:** Give up on sleep training for the night. Nurse my baby to settle him down. Watch his cries subside and breathing quiet. Stroke his soft cheek. Take in his already-getting-too-big body. Plead for time to slow down.
- **8:15 PM:** Carefully (*carefully*... it's like defusing a bomb) transfer my (finally) sleeping baby boy into his crib. Head downstairs to help Joey, who's working on dinner for us.
- **8:30 PM:** Switch on Netflix, inhale some dinner (*when* did I eat last??), and finish the project I abandoned to sprint for the train earlier that day. I respond to my co-workers' emails, who are even more distressed since I haven't responded in over three hours (unacceptable for a global law firm - they're always on duty).
- **10:00 PM:** Close my laptop (tomorrow's another day). Leave the dishes for my husband to wash while I pack up everything Beckett and I need the next day. Finally, I take a quick shower and collapse into bed.
- **12:00 AM:** Awaken to the sounds of my hungry little guy who just realized I snuck away while he slept. Nurse again. Get in as much sweet baby love as I can, while also longing desperately for sleep. Transfer him back to his crib.
- **3:00 AM:** Awaken (again) to the sounds of my hungry little guy (again), who is upset that I've left him (again). Lift him from his crib (again) and nurse him (again). I struggle to hang onto consciousness.
- **5:00 AM:** Lather, rinse, repeat.

In just a few months, life had become one endless blur. All I could do was try to keep up with the demands of work, motherhood, and life, and I was even failing at that. I was burned out, though I hadn't realized it at the time.

"Truth is like a surgery. It hurts but cures. It gives instant relief but has side effects forever." -Curiane

Back to that lovely February afternoon. Joey and I were enjoying our first date in months. We needed this time together. The weekdays were a frantic sprint from the moment we woke up

to the moment we went to bed. By the time the weekend rolled around, we were stressed and exhausted and looking down the barrel of a long list of household chores that needed our immediate attention.

Since we were both tired and overwhelmed with obligations that weren't particularly enjoyable or meaningful to us, we had turned on each other. We had started bickering about trivial things. We came to see each other as the enemy, the source of all of our struggles. Intellectually we knew better, but we didn't have anyone else to blame so we took it out on each other. We knew something had to change, but we didn't know what. We thought an afternoon on our own would be a good start.

We hired a sitter to watch Beckett so we could sneak away for an afternoon date. We ended up at a new restaurant in the area that had wood-fired pizza, an extensive wine list, and an outdoor fire pit. We grabbed some pizza, drinks, and just *connected* for the first time in months.

It was refreshing to relax with my favorite person in the world. No crying. No nursing. No responsibilities for the moment. Just great food, great wine, and great conversation.

Little did I know our lives were about to change forever.

* * *

Joey paid our bill and we headed for the parking lot. I put the car in reverse to head home, but something stopped me. I switched the engine off. Without warning, I put my head in my hands and started to cry.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Joey was confused. I had an upbeat attitude all through lunch. These tears came out of nowhere.

I cried harder.

"Sarah, what's going on? Why are you crying?" His confusion escalated. He had no idea what was wrong with me.

Within just a few minutes, I was sobbing so hard I couldn't speak and I was shaking.

"Sarah, you're scaring me. What's wrong?" Looking back, I can imagine he rationalized this outburst as erratic new mom hormones, which I can't deny probably played at least a small part.

At that point, I had no words. I didn't know what to say. I was just... *sad*. And scared. And hopeless. And exhausted. And pissed off. And resentful — about *everything*.

On the surface, my life was as close to perfect as it gets. We lived in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. I had a well-paying job I loved. I worked with people I respected and who valued my contributions. My husband was supportive and caring and loyal and funny. And he loved me to bits. He even *washed dishes*.

Our son was healthy and growing by leaps and bounds every day. We had financial security, a whole group of incredible friends, and fun vacations planned with our extended family. The weather was 70 degrees. In *February*.

His question was a reasonable one. What the hell was wrong with me? What could I possibly have to complain about? Our life was seemingly perfect.

After ten minutes or so, my cries started to subside. I took a few deep breaths and said the thing I never expected to say.

"Joey, I can't keep doing this."

"*What* can't you keep doing?" He was still confused.

"This. Our life. Working all the time. Never seeing our son. Never seeing you. Feeling like I'm *constantly going*, but I never really accomplish anything. I feel like a complete failure as a mom. I love my job and I love my team, but I'm killing myself trying to work the way I used to. You and I fight more than we ever have. Everything is just so intense now. Life is just *hard*. I never sleep. I don't get to see my friends or do anything that *feels good*. My life now consists of nothing but chores and breastfeeding and work and sitting on a train I hate. Most of all, I feel like a *terrible* mom. I'm never there for Beckett. He gets twelve hours of quality time with a bunch of strangers at daycare, and I get to see him for 30 minutes at night when he's cranky and tired and mad that I've been gone all day. I *miss* him. I miss *you*... I miss *me*. Nothing is working for any of us, and I just don't see it getting any better."

That's how I talk to Joey when I'm emotional, in diatribes. They're usually overwhelming for him, but (God love him) he listens. He was silent. He was taking what I've said to heart, but he was still working through how to respond. Before he got the chance, I continued.

"Joey, I know we've made some very conscious decisions about our life. We both wanted this baby. We love where we live. We love our jobs. We love that our family and friends are all nearby. We love the city, it's home to us both. But how are we ever going to get off this hamster wheel if we don't take a hard look at the choices we're making right now?"

I kept going. Once I get started, it's hard to stop until I get it all out.

"I love it here, but I don't know if I love it enough to sacrifice *everything*. Our marriage. Our relationship with our son. These years when he's little are precious, and I feel like I'm missing all of it. I already feel like it's going to be over in a blink of an eye. I can't take it. To make matters worse, even though I'm killing myself at work to keep up, I can tell my team is disappointed when I don't respond to emails right away or when I can't take on more projects. They're not used to me saying no. Even with how hard I'm working, I feel like I'm just not measuring up anymore."

I kept going...

"Joey, I thought I could juggle it all. I thought I could handle this. Or at the very least, I thought I'd be resourceful enough to figure out how to solve whatever problems came up. But I'm *not* good at this. I don't know how to be a mom and a wife and a friend and a daughter and a sister and have a career all at once. I hate who I am now. I'm bitchy and impatient and stressed out all the time. I can't keep up this charade of 'having it all together.' The truth is, I'm miserable. *You're* miserable. Beckett is miserable. When it comes down to it, our family is my priority and we're the ones getting screwed the most right now."

And going...

"Look, I know we're in a tough phase. Beckett is still young. We're just getting in our new groove. Everyone tells me it gets easier. But the things I don't like right now aren't going to get better. We both spend twenty hours a week on a train, at best. That's all time I could be spending with you and Beckett, or on my own relaxing, or with friends. We spend \$1,500 a month on daycare alone. We live in a 2-bedroom condo an hour outside of the city. If we ever want another baby, we can't afford a bigger place or the cost of daycare for two kids, not without making our commute even longer and having to work harder. I'm just looking down the road, and I can't figure out what we can do to make things better, right now or in the future. I'm at a loss. I just don't know how to fix this."

My tears had calmed, but I was scared. I was terrified to let Joey in on all of this. Things had been... *touchy* between us for months. I felt like he was going to accuse me of pulling the rug out from under him. It wasn't long ago that we had taken marriage vows based on a certain reality. I felt like I was changing the rules on him all of a sudden. Everything we had built together no longer worked for me. I had no idea how he would respond.

After a few minutes of quiet reflection, Joey leaned over and gave me a big, warm hug. He wiped my tears and looked into my eyes.

"Sarah, I get it, and I agree. We can't keep going like this. I do think some things will change over time. But if you're not happy, I'm not okay with that. We're going to figure this out. I don't know what the answer is, but we'll figure it out together. We're a team, and we're going to do whatever we need to do for our family. I'm open to whatever happens. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

And... more tears.

SAMPLE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Argenal, MA, CPC is on a mission to eradicate the burnout epidemic that's crushing working parents so they can finally enjoy these precious years of their lives. She is the founder of The Argenal Institute based in Austin, TX, host of the popular Working Parent Resource Podcast, and creator of the Whole SELF Lifestyle™ Method, a sustainable and long-term approach to personal fulfillment in the modern world.

Sarah combines twenty years of experience in areas such as psychotherapy, professional coaching, teaching, and complex project management to help working parents reclaim their time, energy, and identity. She has been featured in publications such as *NBC News*, *Healthline*, *Thrive Global*, *Working Mother*, and *PsychCentral*, and is a frequent guest on business and parenting podcasts around the world. Sarah lives with her husband and two sons in Austin, Texas. Visit www.argenalinstitute.com to learn more.

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