

Too Many Tabs

The Family Operating System



Katherine Guest

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A funny, honest look behind the curtain of full-time work, neurodiverse family life, SEND advocacy, invisible load and the tiny administrative grenades that nearly finish us off.

K. Guest

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Too Many Tabs: The Family Operating System

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Expanded humorous memoir-style draft with added lived-experience scenes.

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Disclaimer

This book is for education, humour, reflection and practical self-support only. It is not medical, therapeutic, legal, educational, parenting, diagnostic or crisis advice, and it is not a substitute for professional support. If you or someone in your household is at risk of harm, in crisis, or needs urgent support, contact an appropriate professional or emergency service in your area.

Some details, examples and wording are adapted, blended or generalised to protect privacy. The stories are written to capture the truth of the load, not to expose anyone's private life.

Use what helps. Laugh where you can. Skip what does not fit. This is not another standard to meet. It is a permission slip to stop pretending the family operating system is running smoothly when half the tabs are frozen and someone has just asked where their other shoe is.

Introduction: If You Are Reading This on Empty

If you are reading this while hiding in the loo, sitting halfway up the stairs, eating something directly from the packet, or pretending to look for laundry while actually avoiding one more question about where something is, welcome. You are among your people.

This book began life as something much more sensible. It had sections. It had methods. It used phrases like cognitive drag and low-capacity protocol, which are useful phrases, but also sound like something you would say in a training room while pointing at a slide.

The truth is messier and much funnier, mainly because if we do not laugh at certain parts of family life, we will end up staring into the fridge at 6:12pm whispering, "Who is in charge here?" despite knowing, with deep personal resentment, that the answer is us.

I have spent over twenty years in pharmaceutical sales. I can prepare for meetings, hold strategic conversations, manage stakeholders, absorb pressure, read a room, and make professional noises while someone says "alignment" for the sixth time in one call. I can look composed in environments where everyone is pretending they are not slightly tired.

And yet I have also been nearly defeated by a school email, a missing water bottle, an empty fridge, a form that needed printing, a supermarket meltdown, a child who could not possibly wear those socks, and the spiritual violence of being asked "what's for tea?" while still wearing my work shoes.

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That is the gap this book lives in. The gap between the capable woman everyone sees and the woman at home trying to run a neurodiverse household, a job, a marriage, the SEND admin, the emotional weather, the sibling fairness tribunal, the dog logistics, the school communication archive, and the mysterious household belief that mothers are born knowing where every charger is.

This is not a book about becoming calmer, shinier, more optimised, or the sort of person who decants cereal into matching containers. I respect those people, but I do not understand their ways.

This is a book about the invisible caregiver load. The work after work. The thinking behind the thinking. The way a family with additional needs does not just require more love. It often requires more planning, more advocacy, more explaining, more holding, more adjusting, more paperwork, more invisible calculations, and a level of logistics that would make a military operation look under-prepared.

It is also about the absurdity of it all. Because sometimes the only honest response to modern family life is laughter with an edge on it.

The promise

This is not a book about becoming calmer, shinier, or more optimised. It is about telling the truth about the load, laughing where we can, and making life cost less.

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Chapter 1: The Call Notes Incident

Or: how three tiny sentences nearly ended my professional will to live It is never the impressive part of the job that breaks me.

Not the meeting. Not the complex conversation. Not the moment where I need to sound calm, informed, commercially sharp and socially normal while my brain is quietly playing the theme tune from a disaster film.

It is the call notes.

The limp little administrative epilogue after the actual work. The part where I take a real human interaction, flatten it into three bullet points, feed it into a system, and reassure the corporate machine that yes, a conversation did happen and yes, it had an objective and yes, we are all still pretending this is not theatre with dropdown menus.

The maddening thing is that call notes are not hard. They are just there, sitting at the end of the day like a damp towel over the back of a chair. And somehow, when my brain has already spent eight hours being useful, three sentences can feel like being asked to climb Ben Nevis in formal shoes.

This is the part people miss when they say, "It'll only take five minutes." Five minutes is not always five minutes. Sometimes five minutes is a trapdoor. Sometimes five minutes requires remembering the conversation, deciding what mattered, locating the right portal, choosing professional words, not using the phrase "everyone remained alive", and tolerating the sheer injustice that the task still exists after you have already done the actual work.

The same thing happens with SEND paperwork, school forms, appointment notes and evidence gathering. The task is technically small. The meaning attached to it is enormous. A five-minute note can become the difference between remembering a pattern and sitting in a meeting three months later trying to prove something happened while your brain offers only, "Wednesday was bad."

The worst example of this was not actually call notes. It was a SEND meeting.

I had prepared for it like I was presenting evidence to a parliamentary select committee and not sitting in a teacher's office surrounded by small chairs and laminated learning objectives. I had examples. Dates. Behaviours. Concerns. Things I had noticed at home. Things school had not seen. Things that mattered because if I did not say them clearly, they might disappear into the soft grey fog of "parental anxiety".

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In the car, I was articulate. In the shower, I was practically legal counsel. In my head, I had opening remarks. I had evidence. I had a strong but reasonable tone. I was going to advocate beautifully, like a woman who knew exactly what needed to happen and owned at least one blazer capable of changing policy.

Then I sat down opposite the teacher and my entire operating system crashed.

The emotional toll arrived before my first coherent sentence. It did not knock politely. It kicked the door open, grabbed the microphone, and announced that today we would be crying in an educational setting.

All the questions I wanted to ask vanished. Every example I had collected was hijacked by complete overwhelm. My brain did not offer dates or specifics. It offered moisture.

I could feel myself getting tearful, and then I became embarrassed about getting tearful, which is a very efficient way to add a second fire to the first one. I did not want them to feel sorry for me. I did not want to look weak. I am strong. I am independent. I am capable. I have handled difficult conversations in professional settings for years. And yet there I was, crying in the teacher's office like a woman who had been emotionally ambushed by a phonics display.

The worst part was not even the crying. It was the feeling that I had wasted the opportunity. That I had failed to advocate properly because the load had finally become too heavy to hold and explain at the same time.

That is one of the cruellest parts of SEND advocacy. The parent is expected to be calm, clear, factual, well-evidenced and emotionally regulated while discussing the thing that is most likely to undo them. It is like being asked to deliver a TED Talk while carrying a laundry basket full of bees.

So no, the problem was not that I did not care enough or had not prepared enough. The problem was that caring that much had a cost, and for once the cost arrived in the room before the bullet points did.

This is what invisible load does. It does not always announce itself as a dramatic breakdown. Sometimes it waits until the exact moment you need your words, then quietly unplugs the router.

The first useful thing is not to shame yourself for finding small tasks hard or big moments overwhelming. It is to ask what hidden cost is attached. Timing? Switching? Emotional weight? Too many steps? The fact that the task is boring enough to enter your bloodstream?

Some tasks deserve your excellence. Some deserve your compliance and nothing more. And some moments deserve a support plan for the parent too.

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Stick this somewhere visible

Small tasks can be expensive. Big advocacy moments can be expensive too. If your brain goes blank, it may be load, not failure.

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Chapter 2: The Shiny Work Version

Why colleagues get the premium subscription and home gets the free trial By 3pm I can still look like a reasonable adult.

This is one of my more dangerous skills.

I can nod thoughtfully. I can say, "That makes sense" when nothing of the sort has occurred. I can ask a follow-up question, hold a professional expression, and appear to be a woman with both a career and a nervous system.

Inside, however, the situation is more like a laptop with seventeen browser tabs open, one of them playing music, none of them labelled, and a tiny warning box saying STORAGE ALMOST FULL.

Then the working day ends. Or rather, the paid working day ends. The unpaid second shift stands by the front door with a clipboard.

At work there is structure. Meetings have titles. People use calendars. Sometimes they even send agendas, which is a level of civilisation seldom seen in domestic life. At home, demands arrive by shouting. Someone needs a snack. Someone cannot find a thing they are standing next to. Someone has remembered a school requirement due tomorrow. The dog has interpreted your entrance as a sporting event.

And suddenly the shiny professional version evaporates.

Colleagues got the composed version. Home gets the woman who cannot process why there is a wet sock on the stairs and why everyone is pretending this is normal.

The shiny version is not free. Masking costs. Professionalism costs. Tone costs. Facial expressions cost. Sitting through inefficient conversations without visibly leaving your body costs. Every "no problem at all" has a receipt.

For parents in neurodiverse households, this is even sharper because you are often masking in multiple directions. You may be smoothing things at work while also carrying school concerns in the background. You may be listening to a business update while mentally drafting an email about support needs. You may be smiling professionally while remembering that your child held it together all day at school and may fall apart the second they are safe at home.

At some point, after the meeting in which I had accidentally turned into a human puddle, we decided my husband would take the next SEND meeting.

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This was partly strategic and partly because there was a reasonable concern that if I went back into that office, the carpet might remember me.

I prepared him exactly the way I prepare for work. Key messages. Desired outcomes. Things not to get distracted by. The actual points that needed saying. The things I had tried to say before my feelings staged a coup.

If I had possessed the emotional capacity, I would have made him a slide deck called SEND Meeting: Account Plan and Objection Handling. Instead, I sent him in with a list. A very clear list. My list. My words. My invisible labour, neatly formatted for someone else's face.

And the annoying thing is, he was brilliant.

He went in calm. He followed the list. He did not deviate. He did not try to explain the whole family ecosystem from birth to present day. He did not say, "Also, while we are here..." and open seventeen more emotional browser tabs. He went through it step by step and came out with an action plan.

An actual action plan. Clear points. Clear next steps. A grown-up outcome from a grown-up meeting. He looked completely capable. Like a proper adult. Like a man who could be trusted with folders.

I was pleased, obviously. We needed the outcome. I was grateful. I was relieved.

I was also, if I am being completely honest, slightly miffed.

Because those were still my words.

This is the family operating system all over again. I design the process, gather the evidence, hold the context, prepare the brief, anticipate the risks, and then someone else walks in holding my notes and appears effortlessly reasonable.

I do not want a medal. I would just like a small plaque that says: strategic brain by Kate, delivery by calmer available adult.

You are not a better person at work and a worse one at home. You are the same person at different battery percentages. And sometimes the whole family system works better when the person with all the tabs open is allowed to write the brief rather than deliver it while emotionally on fire.

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The polished version of you has a cost. Sometimes the most useful thing you can do is hand someone else the brief.

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Chapter 3: The Day Everything Had Sirens On

A short history of being bullied by notifications

There is a particular kind of day where nothing is actually on fire, but everything has arrived wearing a helmet.

Email. Ping. Message. Reminder. School app. Work update. Calendar alert. A small red notification circle with the emotional presence of a court summons.

Your brain, trying to be helpful, treats every single one as urgent.

This is how I end up living like an overexcited office manager with a whistle. I answer things. I switch things. I start things. I half-finish things. I remember other things. I become convinced that if I do not reply immediately, the entire social and professional infrastructure of my life will collapse.

At some point I find myself standing in the kitchen holding my phone, a school email, a charger, and a sense of doom.

One of the clearest examples of this happened just before I was about to go into a stand meeting.

For anyone outside pharmaceutical sales, a stand meeting is where you stand beside your data and your materials and hope that people come over to talk to you about your products. It sounds simple until you realise you have absolutely no idea what they are going to ask. You need every tab open. Clinical data. Guidelines. Objections. Patient types. Local pathways. Competitor questions. The appropriate professional face for someone who has asked something wildly unpredictable while you are holding a leaflet and pretending your feet do not hurt.

So there I was, about to switch into highly prepared professional mode, when my phone beeped.

School email.

Here we go again.

The message was cheerful in that particular school-email way that suggests a grenade has been wrapped in clip art.

They had sorted the class allocations for next year. Unfortunately, my child was not going to be in the same class as their chosen friend.

OFFS.

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Really?

For school, this was probably a timetable decision. A balancing exercise. Names on a spreadsheet. A reasonable administrative choice made by people trying to organise hundreds of children without losing the will to live.

For me, it was a disaster projection exercise.

In about three seconds, my brain had fast-forwarded to September. School refusal. Morning battles. Anxiety. Tears. Emails. Meetings. Me explaining, again, why this was not a small thing. Me trying not to sound dramatic while describing the dominoes I could already see lining up in the hallway.

This is the part people do not always understand. Parents of neurodivergent children are not catastrophising because we enjoy recreational doom. We are often forecasting based on data. Lived data. Painful data. The kind gathered at 7:42am when a child cannot get through the front door and you are due on a call at nine.

School sees one decision. We see the likely consequences of that decision, because we are the ones who will be holding the fallout when the spreadsheet has moved on.

And then, because life has comic timing, I had to put the phone away, stand at the table, smile professionally, and be ready to discuss clinical evidence as though my internal family operating system had not just started flashing red.

False urgency is very persuasive. It tells you that movement is progress and that replying is the same as deciding. It makes you feel productive while quietly scattering your attention across the floor like Lego.

The rebellious act is to pause. Not for long. This is not a mindfulness retreat. Just long enough to ask: is this an actual fire, or is it merely waving its arms?

Actual fire: deal with it. Needs containing: acknowledge it and park it. Just noisy: let it sit there making its little noises while you do the thing that actually matters.

A ping is not a summons. A school app message is not automatically the headteacher rappelling through the ceiling. But when you have lived enough consequences, your nervous system learns to scan for dominoes.

That is not drama. That is pattern recognition with a handbag.

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Urgent is not the same as important. But parents who have carried the fallout often see dominoes other people miss.

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Chapter 4: The Doorway Trapdoor

Why coming home can feel like being launched into a second unpaid shift

The first ten minutes at home are not a transition. They are an ambush with soft furnishings.

You open the door with the last thread of professional composure still attached. You are technically a person. You have keys. You have a bag. You may even have a small hope that you will be allowed to remove your shoes before becoming operational.

This hope is naive.

The dog launches itself at you like an enthusiastic bailiff. Someone shouts "Mum?" from a room they could easily leave. There is a school bag in the hallway having a quiet breakdown. The fridge is empty in a way that feels personal. A child needs something, another child is wronged by the existence of the first child, and the house itself seems to be asking why you have failed to provide leadership.

Every article about exhausted parents tells you to sit in the car for ten minutes before going into the house. Apparently this is called decompression.

I would love to report that I do this. That I sit peacefully on the drive, breathing, reflecting, letting the day fall away while my nervous system gently returns to baseline.

Sadly, by the time I get home I am usually so desperate for a wee that decompression has become a medical emergency.

My transition strategy is less "quiet reflection" and more "race the bladder".

So no, I am not sitting in the car romantically staring through the windscreen like a spy whose mission has gone wrong. I am sprinting through the front door while the dog launches itself at me and someone starts a sentence with "Mum, where is..." before I have reached the downstairs loo.

This is why advice written for imaginary parents needs editing. Some of us do not need a ten-minute mindful re-entry ritual. Some of us need everyone to move out of the hallway because we have been on the A14 and made poor hydration choices.

Still, the doorway matters. Work mode and home mode are different operating systems. Work mode has role clarity, professional language, and adults who mostly do not need convincing to wear trousers. Home mode has sensory input, hunger, emotional weather systems, dog paws, missing items, and the ambient accusation of laundry.

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If you parent a child who masks all day, the doorway can also be where their heldtogether self collapses. School got the regulated version. Home gets the fallout. This is not because home is wrong. It is because home is safe, which is beautiful and also, let us be honest, sometimes extremely inconvenient.

So everyone is transitioning at once. You from work. Your child from school. The household from day to evening. The dog from normal dog to Olympic-level greeter. Nobody has chaired this meeting.

The fix is not a lifestyle overhaul. The fix is a landing strip, even if yours begins after the urgent wee. Five minutes where you are not solving, deciding, locating or emotionally absorbing. Five imperfect minutes to return to your body before the household starts pressing every button.

Say it out loud: "Give me five minutes to come back online." If someone continues to submit requests through your face, repeat: "I hear you. I am loading."

Will they respect this perfectly? Of course not. This is a family, not a leadership retreat. But even imperfect buffering helps.

The doorway is a handover point, not a launchpad. Protect it like the evening depends on it, because frankly, it often does.

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A buffer does not have to be elegant. Even the post-wee version counts.

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Chapter 5: The Tesco Tribunal

When a public moment feels like a parenting performance review

Nobody tells you that one of the hardest parts of parenting is doing it in places with fluorescent lighting.

At home, a difficult moment is difficult. In public, a difficult moment becomes theatre. There are witnesses. There are trolleys. There is usually one woman near the apples with the facial expression of a magistrate.

Supermarket shopping is not an errand. It is a sensory assault course with meal planning attached.

Everything is bright. Everything is packaged like it is making a personal promise. Sweets. Cakes. Cereals. Tiny toys near the checkout placed there by people who clearly do not fear judgement in the afterlife. Even the middle aisle has things nobody needed until children discovered them and suddenly developed a deep spiritual connection to a novelty water bottle shaped like a dinosaur.

Then the negotiation begins.

Mum, can I have this?

No.

Can I have that?

No.

Why?

Because we came for pasta, milk and whatever vegetable I can convince myself counts as effort. We did not come for a fourteen-pound collection of sugar, plastic and future regret.

Another aisle. Another request. Another no.

There are only so many no's a child can absorb before the wheels start making that concerning noise.

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Food shopping is already a chore. It is not a whimsical family outing. It is a must-do essential carried out under lighting designed to reveal both your pores and your life choices. Add a hundred versions of "can I have this?" and it is amazing how quickly limited patience becomes no patience, then negative patience, then whatever comes after negative patience where you start fantasising about living alone in a flat above a quiet library.

Eventually came the line: "I hate you."

Which felt harsh, considering I had mostly funded the lifestyle in which this child was becoming outraged about biscuits.

And of course, because it was public, the moment immediately became two events. The actual event, which was a child reaching capacity in a supermarket, and the parent event, which was me trying not to perform competence for the woman near the apples.

The audience always makes it worse. Without the audience, you can focus on the child. With the audience, part of your brain starts issuing statements to an imaginary press conference: We ask for privacy at this difficult time while Mother attempts to leave Tesco with dignity and yoghurts.

Rationally, you may understand sensory overload, transitions, hunger, impulse control, demand fatigue and the fact that supermarkets are basically casinos for the nervous system but with worse lighting.

Unfortunately, your rational brain is not always the department in charge.

Public behaviour does not feel like a moment. It feels like a verdict.

The move is not to win the Tesco Tribunal. The move is to leave the courtroom. Reduce words. Reduce input. Move somewhere cheaper if you can. Car park. Quiet corner. Outside the shop. Anywhere with fewer strangers and less lighting designed by people who hate humanity.

Try: "You're safe. We're stepping out for a minute." Not: "Why are you doing this?" Why is a later question. Why requires a regulated brain. Mid-meltdown why is like asking a smoke alarm to reflect on its choices.

The point is not to become the calmest parent in Britain. The point is to remember that public behaviour is not your annual appraisal.

Also, anyone judging from the apple section can take a number.

Stick this somewhere visible

Public behaviour is a system crash, not a verdict. Manage regulation, not reputation.

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Chapter 6: Dinner, the Worst Daily Surprise

Because apparently people need feeding every single evening

Dinner is not cooking. Dinner is logistics, diplomacy, psychology, stock control, sensory risk assessment, time management, emotional labour, nutrition theatre, and the daily crushing realisation that everyone expects to eat again tomorrow.

I resent this more than I can explain.

Every day, the question returns: what's for tea? It arrives innocently, as if it has not previously destroyed whole evenings. It contains hidden sub-questions. What do we have? Who will eat it? Who ate the thing I thought we had? How long will it take? Is anyone near meltdown? Can I tolerate chopping? Will someone reject it with the theatrical disgust of a Victorian child presented with gruel?

And the biggest question: why would I try something new when someone won't like it anyway?

Domestic life is relentless because nothing stays solved. You clean the kitchen and then the household responds by continuing to live. You do laundry and people arrogantly keep wearing clothes. You buy food and then, in behaviour I still consider unreasonable, they eat it.

Add neurodiversity and the dinner matrix gets even more elaborate. Safe foods. Texture issues. Brand specificity. Hunger that appears suddenly and with legal force. A child who needed pasta yesterday but today finds pasta emotionally suspicious.

So if dinner makes you feel trapped, it is not because you are failing at domesticity. It is because feeding people repeatedly is absurd.

The solution is not to become a person who loves meal planning. I have tried to imagine this and my brain rejects the file format. The solution is to make dinner less impressive.

Repeat meals. Use safe foods. Create combinations so boring they could attend a compliance meeting. Pasta plus protein-ish thing plus fruit. Toast plus eggs. Wraps plus whatever can be placed inside without legal challenge. Freezer food with cucumber on the side if you need to feel like civilisation remains.

A meal can be functional, tolerated and done. That is not failure. That is a controlled landing.

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Some evenings are not for culinary ambition. Some evenings are for distributing calories before everyone starts chewing the emotional furniture. If nobody cries and at least one food group makes a guest appearance, I am calling it success.

Stick this somewhere visible

Dinner is a decision problem, not a cooking problem. Functional beats impressive.

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Chapter 7: The Other Families Appear to Have Read the Manual

Comparison, school gates and the lie of the effortless Tuesday

There are families who seem to leave the house like an advert.

Hair brushed. Shoes located. Coats appropriate to the weather. Children moving in the same general direction. No one negotiating sock seams like a trade union dispute.

I do not begrudge these families their peace. I simply observe them with the haunted expression of someone watching a nature documentary about a species with better executive function.

Comparison is sneaky because it rarely announces itself as comparison. It arrives as a small internal collapse at the school gate. A social media photo. Someone saying, "We just popped out for the day," as if popping anywhere is a neutral act and not, in some households, a strategic deployment involving snacks, exits, sensory considerations and three backup plans.

Just popped. Those words can do violence to a tired parent.

The pain is not really envy. It is context collapse. You see someone else's visible moment and compare it to your full behind-the-scenes production. You see calm entry and compare it to your morning, which involved outfit negotiations, missing forms, emotional regulation, breakfast refusal, late shoes, sibling injustice and you whispering, "Please, not today," into the hallway.

If you are parenting neurodivergence, your family may simply be playing a different version of the game. More variables. More transitions to manage. More invisible preparation. More recovery time. More advocacy. More systems. More moments where other people see behaviour but not the load beneath it.

That does not make your family lesser. It makes the comparison mathematically useless.

Still, it stings. It stings when other children seem to do activities easily. It stings when family days out look spontaneous. It stings when someone says, "Have you tried just being consistent?" and you briefly consider walking into the sea fully clothed.

The antidote is not to become immune. The antidote is to interrupt the story before it becomes evidence.

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Let them have that. That is not my setup. That is not my load. That is not my assignment.

Other people's ease is not proof that you are failing. It may simply be proof that their operating system has different settings, fewer pop-ups, and perhaps children who accept weather-appropriate clothing without launching a philosophical enquiry.

Meanwhile, you are doing a harder thing than it looks like from the outside. Count the invisible wins. The transition you helped. The school email you sent. The meltdown you prevented by leaving early. The sibling you reassured. The evidence you captured. The day you made smaller so it could work.

Your life does not need to look easy to be worth respecting.

Stick this somewhere visible

Their visible ease is not your benchmark. Different household, different load, different assignment.

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Chapter 8: The Court of Sibling Fairness

Where every decision is appealed immediately

There is no judge more alert than a sibling who believes fairness has been breached.

They can be in another room, apparently absorbed in something else, and still detect that another child received a different consequence with the accuracy of airport radar.

"That's not fair."

There it is. The phrase that can make an already tired parent feel like they have been asked to defend a policy at a select committee.

Fairness is particularly complicated in a neurodiverse household because equal treatment is often the wrong treatment. One child may need firm structure and clear consequences. Another may need reduced demands, regulation support, flexibility, or a completely different route to the same destination.

You know this. Your training-by-fire knows this. The child watching from across the room may not.

To them it can look like one person gets away with things. One gets more attention. One changes the plan. One sets the emotional temperature. One causes everyone else to wait.

And you are left running two parenting operating systems under one roof while trying not to make either child feel like they are being given the budget version of family life.

This is exhausting because you are not simply parenting behaviour. You are translating need. You are protecting dignity. You are explaining difference without exposing private information. You are validating resentment without letting it become cruelty. You are holding compassion for the child in crisis and the child who is tired of crisis having such a large speaking role.

No wonder it feels impossible. It is a lot.

The fantasy is one family plan where everyone participates happily and there are candid photos of shared joy. The reality is often split activities, adjusted expectations, one parent going this way, another going that way, and someone eating a snack in a car park while a plan is emotionally renegotiated.

This is not failure. This is adaptive family logistics.

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Fair does not mean the same. Unfortunately, this sentence does not become magically convincing because you say it sincerely.

Try anyway. "I know it feels unfair. Fair does not always mean everyone gets the same thing. It means everyone gets what they need. Right now, that looks different."

Then, crucially, stop giving a TED Talk. Over-explaining fairness to an upset child often creates a sequel nobody asked for. Sometimes you explain once and then hold the boundary. Later, when emotions are lower, you give the sibling the thing they need most: recognition.

"I know that was frustrating. I saw you waiting. I know it can feel like you have to adjust a lot too."

Because they do.

The neurodivergent child needs support. The sibling needs acknowledgement. You need a lie down in a silent hotel room paid for by an imaginary grant.

Until then, aim for balance over time, not perfect symmetry in every moment. Family fairness is not a spreadsheet. It is a weather system.

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Fair is not equal. Different needs require different support, and siblings still need their load seen too.

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Chapter 9: Marriage by Shared Calendar

The relationship casualty nobody puts on the school form

There is a stage of family life where romance becomes looking at your partner across the kitchen and saying, "Did you reply to that email?" This is rarely included in wedding readings.

Nobody tells you that invisible load does not just fill your calendar. It gets into your relationship like glitter. Suddenly intimacy has to compete with logistics, resentment, tiredness, SEND admin, childcare negotiations, household maintenance, school communication, work pressure, and the question of who last bought dog food.

You may still love each other deeply. You may also communicate primarily through calendar invites and exhausted facial expressions.

This is the relationship casualty nobody talks about: not dramatic collapse, but administrative erosion.

Connection starts to feel like another task. A text from someone you adore can still land as another thread to hold. A conversation with your partner can be less "how are you?" and more "we need to discuss the thing, the other thing, the appointment, the bill, the behaviour, the plan, and whether anyone has clean PE shorts."

In a household with additional needs, the couple relationship often becomes the infrastructure. You are co-managers of the family operating system. You compare notes. You split roles. You update each other on school, work, siblings, triggers, sleep, food, evidence, forms and who is currently closest to losing it.

This is important. It is also not the same as connection.

Sometimes you do not need a date night. You need to sit in the same room without being required to solve a problem.

Start smaller. A low-demand check-in. Ten minutes with no logistics. A message that says, "I am maxed out but I love you." A shared joke. A cup of tea delivered without commentary. Sitting next to each other like two crashed apps gently rebooting.

And with friendships, the same rule applies. Low effort still counts. You can love people and be slow to reply. You can miss people and also not have capacity for a full conversational maintenance contract.

Connection does not always need to be deep, prompt, polished or impressive. Sometimes it just needs to remain real enough to exist.

Love can survive in small signals. Especially if someone else remembers the dog food.

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Stick this somewhere visible

Connection costs energy. Make relationships lower-demand before the silence turns into distance.

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Chapter 10: The Moment Before You Blow

When "Mummy, I need you" lands like a court order You have finally sat down.

Not in a luxurious way. Not with candles. Not on purpose, even. Your body has simply folded into a chair because gravity has made a convincing argument.

The day has included work, messages, school things, emotional things, household things, invisible calculations, one meal decision too many, and possibly a conversation where you used your professional voice so hard you needed recovery time.

For the first time in hours, your system lowers by half a notch.

Then you hear it.

"Mummy?"

A beautiful word. A sacred word. A word that, at that exact moment, makes part of your soul leave through the window.

It is not the request. It is the timing.

On a full-battery day, you may respond warmly. On an empty-battery day, the smallest need lands like proof that you are never off, never unavailable, never allowed to complete a private thought without a tiny person opening a new ticket.

Then comes the snap. Or the cold tone. Or the too-sharp reply that leaves the room quieter in the wrong way.

And instantly, because motherhood is generous like that, guilt arrives carrying a clipboard.

You know they did nothing wrong. You know they need you. You know they are not responsible for your entire accumulated load. And also, you had nothing left.

Both things can be true.

The Family Operating System

The mistake is treating snapping as a moral failure instead of an early warning system you noticed too late.

When you are overloaded, the pause disappears. In a regulated state, stimulus comes in and you have a tiny space to choose. In a depleted state, stimulus comes in and your mouth replies before the better version of you has even found her shoes.

The aim is not to become endlessly patient. The aim is to notice your red flags earlier.

The internal "leave me alone" voice. The jaw tightness. The sudden hatred of noise. The feeling that one more question will push you into a new personality. These are not flaws. They are warning lights.

When they appear, use fewer words. "I need a minute. I will help you in a second." Or: "I've got you. Give me one minute first."

This is not abandonment. This is preventing your child from receiving the error-message version of you.

Repair matters too. Later, when your system is back online: "I was too sharp earlier. I was overloaded. That was not your fault. I am sorry." Repair is not weakness. It is household maintenance.

You do not need to be perfect to be safe. You need to know when your own system has hit capacity and treat that as real information, not evidence for the prosecution.

Stick this somewhere visible

Snapping is often a late signal of overload. Name your limit earlier and buy yourself a pause.

The Family Operating System

Too Many Tabs | The Family Operating System

Chapter 11: The First of November

Or: the day my nervous system filed a formal complaint

It was the first of November, which is an emotionally dangerous date if you have children in the UK.

For adults, the first of November means you are still finding Halloween sweet wrappers in strange places and trying to work out whether it is too early to feel oppressed by Christmas. For children, it means the ancient and unnecessary playground ritual of shouting, "Pinch punch, first of the month," and then making physical contact with another human being before anyone has had a chance to consent to the terms.

A charming tradition, presumably invented by someone with no responsibility for behaviour policies.

We had talked about it before school. Quite carefully, actually. We were working hard on personal space, keeping hands to ourselves and not using our bodies to settle disputes. All the usual parental ambitions that sound beautifully reasonable in the kitchen before 8am and then become much less robust once thirty children are released into a playground with coats, adrenaline and poor impulse control.

I remember thinking we had covered it. Not casually. Properly. We had been clear. No pinch punching. No retaliating. No hands. We were trying to enforce strict limits around personal space, because in our house this was not a cute little manners issue. It was one of those areas where the outside world sees a single behaviour and we see an entire operating system trying to learn a rule that everyone else seems to have downloaded automatically.

My child listened, or at least produced the facial expression that suggests listening. Parents know this expression. It looks convincing from the front. The eyes are in the right place. There may even be a nod. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee the information has been saved to the correct folder.

By the time they reached the playground, excitement had taken over.

Another child pinch-punched first.

Mine pinch-punched back.

Harder.

And, if I am being honest, probably with intent.

The Family Operating System

There were tears. There was upset. There were adults. There was the kind of school incident that starts out as a child's impulse and quickly becomes a parental stomachdrop.

The thing that is difficult to explain, unless you have lived it, is what happened next. My child instantly put the walls up. From the outside, this can look appalling. It can look cold. Defiant. Unbothered. Like there is no remorse at all.

And at the time, there wasn't.

Not because my child was cruel. Not because they were sitting there plotting playground violence like a tiny Bond villain. But because their internal logic was painfully simple. They hit me. I hit them back. Fair response. End of hearing.

In their head, justice had been served. Unfortunately, school was operating under a different legal system.

The Headmaster called before I had even had time to convince myself the situation might quietly disappear into the general background noise of primary school life. You know those phone calls where the voice on the other end is calm, professional and measured, and somehow that makes everything worse? It was one of those.

He explained what had happened. There had been physicality. It was serious. It would not be tolerated. And then, very carefully, the word suspension entered the conversation.

Not as a decision. Not even as an immediate plan. More like a small unexploded device placed neatly on the table between us.

I did what I often do when faced with authority, consequences and the desperate need to be seen as reasonable. I became the agreeable parent.

Of course. Absolutely. I understand. Completely unacceptable. Thank you for letting me know. We will speak to them. We take this seriously.

My professional voice arrived before the rest of me had caught up. The people-pleasing version of me stepped forward, took notes, shook imaginary hands and tried to demonstrate that I was not one of those parents. Not defensive. Not difficult. Not making excuses. Not about to start a sentence with, "Well, actually..." Meanwhile, underneath that very reasonable voice, something was collapsing.

Because all I could think was: do you have any idea what it took to get us here?

It had taken months and months of turmoil to move my child from their lovely little local primary school. The school we wanted to work. The school we had tried so hard to make work. The school that, in another version of life, might have been the easy option, the normal option, the one where you walk to the gate and know the other parents and do not spend your evenings mentally reviewing whether you have made the wrong decision with a side order of guilt.

The Family Operating System

Moving schools was not a neat administrative choice. It was a grieving process with paperwork. It was months of second-guessing, conversations, worry, hope, fear and that particular parental loneliness that comes when everybody has an opinion but nobody else has to live with the consequences.

Private school had started to feel like the lifeboat. Not perfect. Not magic. But maybe safer. Maybe smaller. Maybe more able to hold the version of my child that needed more understanding, clearer boundaries, better support and less constant friction with the environment.

And now, one phone call in, it felt as if the lifeboat had developed a hole and I was being notified politely by the captain.

That is the thing about a school incident when you are already carrying too much. It is never just the incident. It becomes a verdict on every decision you have made so far. One playground moment suddenly stands there wearing a judge's wig and asking whether you have ruined everything.

Had we moved schools for nothing? Had I misunderstood what my child needed? Had I made things worse? Were we going to become the difficult family again? The one people talked about in careful tones? Was this the beginning of another round of meetings, emails, explanations and emotional damage control?

The call ended, but the cost did not.

By the time I put the phone down, I felt as if someone had taken a plug out of the wall somewhere inside me. The rest of the morning carried on, because that is the rude thing about adult life. It does not pause respectfully while your nervous system has a private collapse. There are still meetings. There are still emails. There is still a calendar sitting there with absolutely no interest in your internal weather.

Later that morning, I had my end-of-year review with my manager.

I was prepared. Annoyingly prepared. I had my achievements, my data, my objectives, my examples. I knew the shape of the conversation. I knew what I wanted to say. Work Kate was ready. Work Kate can be very impressive when Home Kate has not been emotionally rugby-tackled by a school phone call.

I sat down determined to compartmentalise, which is one of the great lies highachieving women tell themselves. We imagine our emotions are stored in neat little folders and can be opened and closed according to the calendar invite. Family stress goes here. Work performance goes there. School panic stays outside the meeting room until 12:30, when perhaps it can be considered over a sandwich.

Unfortunately, emotions appear to have absolutely no respect for filing systems.

The review began normally. Performance. Objectives. Progress. The sensible grown-up things sensible grown-ups discuss when both parties are trying to behave as if human beings are mostly made of metrics.

The Family Operating System

And then my manager asked the most dangerous question in the English language.

"How are you?"

People should really be more careful with that question.

Because the answer, it turned out, was not, "Fine, thanks." The answer was not, "Busy, but good." The answer was not any of the socially acceptable corporate options that allow everyone to move briskly on to the next agenda item.

The answer was my entire face starting to leak.

Not dramatic crying. Not film crying. Not the kind of crying with tissues and soft lighting where someone learns something about themselves while piano music plays. It was the quiet, humiliating kind. The kind that starts when somebody accidentally presses the exact bruise you have been pretending is not there.

The Headmaster. The suspension warning. The school move. The months of turmoil. The guilt. The people-pleasing. The panic that the new school was already falling down around my ears. The fear that every choice I had made was wrong. The exhaustion of being the person who sees the dominoes before anyone else notices they are standing up.

It all came out in the one place I least wanted it to appear.

A performance review.

There is something uniquely mortifying about crying at work when you are used to being capable. I had spent years building the version of myself who could handle pressure, deliver results, speak clearly and function in professional environments without giving the impression that my domestic life was being held together by snacks, anxiety and a Google calendar. I could discuss clinical data. I could answer difficult questions. I could stand at a conference table with aching feet and sound like a person who had slept.

And yet there I was, crying because a playground incident had landed on top of a school move, on top of months of advocacy, on top of the invisible load, on top of the private fear that I was failing at all of it.

Except, of course, I was not really crying about pinch punch.

That was almost the least important part.

The pinch punch was the final tab. The one that caused the whole browser to freeze.

The Family Operating System

The social fallout came later, in the quiet ways these things sometimes do. A shift in atmosphere. A sense of being observed differently. The feeling that other parents can be polite and still somehow make you aware that you are no longer standing in quite the same place you were before. I am not going to litigate those moments here. They belong to other people too. But I will say this: being the parent of the child at the centre of an incident is lonely in a way that is hard to describe without sounding paranoid, oversensitive or both.

You become fluent in tiny changes. Who speaks. Who doesn't. Who looks away. Who asks how you are and who asks nothing at all. And all the while you are trying to hold your child with compassion, hold the school relationship with diplomacy, hold your own shame without letting it turn into self-destruction, and still turn up to work like a person whose nervous system has not just filed a formal complaint.

Looking back, I can see what I could not see then.

This was not just a bad day.

It was the beginning of a spiral.

The moment my body finally objected to a workload my mind had been insisting was manageable. The moment coping stopped being a neutral word and started to look suspiciously like a full-time job I had never agreed to take on.

Eventually, it led me to a doctor's appointment. Not because I was weak. Not because I could not cope. But because coping had become the thing I was doing instead of living.

And somewhere beneath the school meetings, the phone calls, the advocacy, the professional performance, the emotional translation, the people-pleasing and the invisible load, there was still a human being trying to run the entire family operating system.

Turns out she was overdue a reboot.

Stick this somewhere visible

The thing that breaks you is rarely just the thing. It is everything already attached to it.

The Family Operating System

Chapter 12: The Life You Thought You Were Getting

Diagnosis, grief, relief and the imaginary easy version

There is a version of life I apparently ordered before reading the small print.

It was not extravagant. I did not imagine perfection. I am British. We do not like to seem greedy.

I imagined ordinary ease. School mornings that were tiring but manageable. Family outings that required snacks but not strategic planning. Children who resisted things in normal ways rather than turning trousers into a philosophical crisis. Work and home existing in different boxes instead of leaking into each other like badly stored soup.

I imagined family life being hard, of course. Everyone says it is hard. But there is hard, and then there is constant.

The constant is what gets you.

Constant management. Constant thinking ahead. Constant advocacy. Constant emotional translation. Constant watching for signs of masking, overload, shutdown, fallout, unfairness, resentment, evidence, patterns, emails, forms, decisions, plans and the one tiny thing everyone else missed that will become a massive thing if you do not catch it now.

The diagnosis, when it came, was not devastation. It was relief.

That may sound strange if you have not lived in the fog before language arrives. But for us, it meant we were no longer relying on vague labels that other people seemed far too comfortable applying. Naughty. Difficult. Unkind. Spoilt. Rude. Challenging.

Those words attach themselves to children quickly when adults do not understand what they are seeing. They also attach themselves to parents. Too soft. Too anxious. Too inconsistent. Too involved. Not firm enough. Too firm. Possibly all of the above by Tuesday.

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The diagnosis gave us a different map. It did not solve everything, but it changed the route. It said: there is a reason. There are patterns. There are needs beneath this. We are not imagining the difference between what the outside world sees and what happens when the mask comes off at home.

For about five minutes, I thought the diagnosis would change how other people understood things.

Adorable.

Schools can say they fully support neurodiversity and still expect a neurodivergent child to behave like a neurotypical child with slightly more colourful stationery. The language changes faster than the expectations do. Everyone loves inclusion until inclusion requires flexibility, inconvenience, adjustment or a meeting longer than twenty minutes.

Then there are the helpful comments.

"We're all a little bit ADHD, aren't we?"

No. We are not all a little bit ADHD in the same way that we are not all a little bit diabetic because we once wanted a biscuit.

Then someone tells you about their neighbour's grandson, or their cousin's child, or someone they saw on television, and it is usually meant kindly, but it can still make you want to gently place your head inside a cupboard.

Because if you know one person with ADHD or autism, you know one person with ADHD or autism. One. Singular. Neurodiversity is not a laminated checklist. Different triggers. Different challenges. Different strengths. Different sensory profiles. Different ways of masking. Different ways of crashing. Different superpowers and different things that make the whole day fall apart before breakfast.

The diagnosis did not make the world instantly kinder. It made us better informed. It gave us language, evidence and a place to stand. But it did not remove the need to explain, advocate, translate and sometimes defend a child from other people's very confident misunderstanding.

Relief, it turns out, can arrive with paperwork.

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You can love your life and still grieve the easier version you thought came with it. The grief is not regret. It is not lack of love. It is the quiet ache that appears when reality has more admin than the brochure suggested.

You may grieve spontaneity. Ease. The family day out that does not require contingency planning. The school meeting where you are believed quickly. The workplace version of you that had more energy before the hidden load began taking rent from your nervous system.

And because you love your family, the grief can feel disloyal. It is not.

You are not mourning your actual child, your actual partner, your actual life. You are mourning the imagined ease. The assumption that some things would be simpler. The idea that effort would lead to flow, rather than effort leading to more management and a form.

Let both exist. I love my family. This is hard. I am grateful. I am tired. I would choose them. I would also like one week where nobody needs anything from me after 8pm and all systems remain stable.

Both.

Stick this somewhere visible

Diagnosis can be a relief and the world can still misunderstand. You can love your life and still grieve the ease you expected.

The Family Operating System

Chapter 13: Building for the Days When Everyone Is Already Weird

The worst-day operating system Some days announce themselves early.

You wake up and the vibe is wrong.

Someone slept badly. Someone cannot find a jumper. The weather is emotionally inconvenient. Work has already started emailing before you've had coffee. Your child is brittle. You are brittle. Even the dog seems administratively demanding.

Nothing catastrophic has happened, but everything is harder than it should be.

These are the days most advice fails immediately because most advice is written for a person who has slept, eaten, prepared, and can locate both shoes.

A lot of family systems are accidentally designed for best days. Best-day you can decide, plan, cook, explain, tidy, regulate, respond, advocate, remember and remain charmingly flexible. Best-day you is lovely. Best-day you may also be fictional several weekdays a month.

Your life needs to work on your worst normal day.

Not crisis day. Not dramatic day. Just low-capacity day. The kind where your brain feels like porridge and everyone still expects transport, food and emotional availability.

The worst-day operating system begins with lowering the standard before the day lowers it for you.

Ask: what actually needs to happen today?

Not what would look good. Not what would make me feel like a woman with her life laminated. What actually needs to happen?

Then reduce decisions. Repeat food. Repeat clothes. Repeat routines. Cancel optional complexity. Put the non-urgent in a metaphorical box and do not let it make eye contact.

Move into contain mode.

The Family Operating System

Contain mode is not glamorous. It does not photograph well. It means stopping things from escalating rather than trying to improve your entire life before dinner.

Mess in one place. One priority. Fewer words. Earlier bedtime if possible. Lower demands. No new systems. No ambitious conversations beside the dishwasher. No deciding to reorganise the family calendar at 9:47pm because anxiety has put on a productivity hat.

For SEND advocacy, worst-day design matters too. Do not rely on your best brain to remember evidence later. Capture things quickly when they happen. Voice notes. Screenshots. A sentence. A date. Anything that stops your future self sitting in a meeting trying to retrieve three months of patterns from a brain that has also been storing packed lunch preferences and whether the dog has had flea treatment.

Worst-day systems are not pessimistic. They are respectful.

They say: this life is demanding, and I refuse to build it around a version of myself who has unlimited capacity and a working printer.

Some days, success is not progress. It is stability. Everyone fed. No major damage. One important thing done. Nobody required to perform calm they did not have.

That counts.

Survival is not a disappointing version of thriving. Sometimes it is the bridge that gets you there.

Stick this somewhere visible

Build systems for low-capacity days, not fantasy days. Containment beats control.

The Family Operating System

Appendix: Emergency Pages

These pages are for the moments when no one has the bandwidth for a full family strategy meeting, least of all you.

WHEN I AM ABOUT TO SNAP

Stop talking. Lower your voice. Move slower than your irritation wants you to. Say: "I need a minute. I will come back." This is overload, not proof that you are a terrible person.

WHEN MY CHILD IS DYSREGULATED

Skip questions, logic and long explanations. Reduce input. Stay close if that helps. Use fewer words: "You're safe. I've got you." Connection works better after regulation.

WHEN WORK AND HOME COLLIDE

Ask: what matters right now, what can wait, and what only needs containing? Choose one thing. Finish something small. Ignore noisy non-fires until your system stops flashing.

WHEN ADMIN IS DROWNING ME

Ask what the drag is. Too many steps? Bad timing? Low-value task? Emotional resentment? Shrink it, dictate it, template it, delay it, or do the minimum version that still counts.

WHEN I START COMPARING

Let them have that. That is not my setup. That is not my load. That is not my assignment.

MINIMUM VIABLE DAY

Today counts if everyone is fed, the essentials happened, and no major damage was done. You are allowed to repeat meals, lower expectations, simplify everything and stop trying to optimise a day that is clearly held together with tape.

THE ONE-LINE RESET

What would make this cost less? Not better. Not prettier. Not more impressive. Less expensive.

The Family Operating System

Final Note: Name the Load. Lower the Cost. Start There.

You did not need another self-improvement project.

You needed language for the thing you were already carrying.

The invisible load is not invisible because it is small. It is invisible because so much of it happens inside your head before anyone else sees the outcome. The remembering, noticing, adjusting, advocating, anticipating, translating, containing, smoothing, planning and recovering.

A full-time job can be demanding. A neurodiverse household can be demanding. SEND advocacy can be demanding. Running them together can feel like operating air traffic control from a kitchen with one working pen and a child asking if tomorrow is PE.

If this book gives you anything, let it be this: stop treating overload as a personal failure.

Name the load. Lower the cost. Start there.

Not with a perfect system. Not with a new personality. Not with a colour-coded life that depends on everyone cooperating and nobody losing a water bottle.

Start with one thing that costs too much. The transition. The dinner question. The school evidence. The work admin. The public moment. The sibling fairness hearing. The relationship that needs a lower-demand signal. The evening where you keep entering at full speed already empty.

Make it cheaper. A shorter script. A lower standard. A five-minute buffer. A repeated meal. A captured note. A smaller promise. A softer landing. A decision you do not have to remake tomorrow.

That is not giving up. That is designing for the life you are actually living.

And honestly, given the number of tabs currently open, that is more than enough.

The Family Operating System

About the Author

K. Guest is a working parent, coach and professional with over twenty years' experience in pharmaceutical sales, and a lived understanding of the collision between demanding work, family life, neurodiversity, SEND advocacy and invisible caregiver load.

She writes for capable people who look like they are coping while privately wondering why the entire household operating system appears to rely on their brain, three snacks and a calendar notification.