

From Overwhelm to Balance: Honoring Your Need for Both Exertion and Rest

Introduction

As a mother who experienced childhood emotional neglect (CEN), you may find yourself craving intense physical labor—choosing tasks like lifting, digging, scrubbing, or carrying over caregiving or play. At times, this drive might even feel more urgent than your need for rest.

Rather than dismissing this as mere exhaustion or overwork, this guide helps you **understand why physical exertion feels so satisfying and how to honor it without neglecting your deeper emotional needs.**

1. Identifying Your Unique Needs: Is It Exertion or Escape?

Your body holds the key to what you need at any given moment—whether it's movement, challenge, solitude, or deep rest.

Reflection Exercise:

Put a check next to any statements that resonate with you:

- ☐ I feel an **intense urge to "get things done"** when I'm emotionally overwhelmed.
- ☐ **Physical labor makes me feel grounded** in a way that rest doesn't.
- ☐ I feel **irritated when I have to slow down** or take a break.
- ☐ I often **volunteer for heavy work** even when I'm tired.
- ☐ I get **frustrated when my children interrupt me** while I'm working.
- ☐ I feel a sense of **achievement and relief** after pushing myself physically.
- ☐ When my partner takes over caregiving, I **prefer doing something physically demanding rather than resting.**
- ☐ I struggle to feel **justified in resting** unless I've "earned it" through effort.

👉 **Patterns to Look For:** If you checked three or more, your body might be seeking exertion as a way to regulate your emotions, **not just because there is work to be done.**

2. Understanding the Psychological & Nervous System Needs at Play

- ✓ **Seeking a "Controlled Struggle"** – Physical labor offers an **intense but controlled** challenge, unlike emotional struggles that feel overwhelming and unpredictable.
 - ✓ **Craving Sensory & Nervous System Regulation** – Hard labor can bring relief by stimulating the **proprioceptive system**, helping the body feel safe and present.
 - ✓ **Breaking Free from Powerlessness** – If you experienced **helplessness in childhood**, taking on hard tasks may feel like reclaiming control.
 - ✓ **Gaining Validation through Work** – If you were praised for being “helpful” but not for expressing emotions, work may feel like the only way to prove your worth.
 - ✓ **Avoiding Guilt & Shame Around Rest** – You may unconsciously believe “**If I work hard enough, I won’t feel like a burden.**”
 - ✓ **Anger & Resentment Toward Your Partner** – If you find yourself resenting their ability to rest, your deeper need might be for **fairness, emotional acknowledgment, or shared responsibility.**
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3. Honoring the Need for Exertion in a Healthy Way

Instead of forcing yourself to “just rest,” **you can meet your need for physical exertion while also supporting emotional balance.**

① Practice Intentional Exertion vs. Default Overwork

- ✓ **Choose activities that nourish you, not just deplete you.**
 - Instead of defaulting to chores, try movement that feels **empowering** (wood chopping, dancing, hiking).
 - If you enjoy physical work, make space for it **as a choice, not just as a necessity.**
 - ✓ **Pair Physical Work with Emotional Awareness**
 - Before starting, ask: *Am I doing this to care for myself or to escape something?*
 - Mid-task, pause and check in: *Is this still serving me, or am I pushing too hard?*
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② Balance Exertion with Other Forms of Nervous System Regulation

If you use physical labor to **regulate emotions**, experiment with **other body-based ways** to create similar effects:

- Weighted blankets (for deep pressure input)
- Carrying a backpack or babywearing
- Rocking, stretching, or pushing against a wall

- Intense exhale breathing (like in martial arts or yoga)
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3 Express Your Needs Clearly & Release the Guilt

You don't have to "deserve" solitude or movement—your needs are valid **without justification**.

Instead of: "I have so much to do, I'll just do it myself."

Try: "I feel restless and need to work with my hands for a while. Can you take over here?"

Instead of: "I should be resting, but I can't relax."

Try: "I'll give my body the exertion it needs first, then check in about rest."

Instead of: "I feel angry when they don't help the way I want them to."

Try: "I need to feel supported not just in tasks, but emotionally too."

4. Letting Go of Shame: Rest & Work Are Both Valid

If guilt arises when you **crave solitude, exertion, or movement instead of caregiving**, remind yourself:

- ♦ *A regulated mother is a better mother—whether through rest or movement.*
 - ♦ *Work can be nourishing, but I am not defined by my productivity.*
 - ♦ *Rest is not a luxury—it is a need, just like movement is.*
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Conclusion: Creating a New, Balanced Relationship with Exertion & Rest

This guide is not about forcing yourself to "slow down" but rather **understanding why movement feels good and how to balance it with other needs**.

Try this:

- 💡 Next time you feel restless or driven to take on a physical task, pause and ask:
- ✓ Do I need movement, or am I seeking emotional escape?
- ✓ How can I meet this need in a way that truly restores me?

Your body's cravings—whether for work, movement, or solitude—are messages, not mistakes. **You deserve to listen to them with compassion.**

Bonus: Quick Reference Affirmations

- ♦ *I honor both my need for movement and my need for stillness.*
- ♦ *I am not just what I do—I am worthy in my being.*
- ♦ *Rest and exertion are both ways to care for myself.*

👉 **What's one way you can give yourself both movement and rest this week?** Write it down as a commitment to balance.