

CLARQO FIELD GUIDES

# The Invisible Load

*A field guide to putting AI to work on the mental load of running a home and a life*

by June Calloway

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## Before we start

There is a particular kind of tiredness that doesn't come from the things you did today. It comes from the things you remembered. The dentist appointment that needs rebooking. The fact that the youngest has grown out of their shoes again. That it's your mother-in-law's birthday in nine days and the present has to be ordered by Thursday to arrive in time. That you're nearly out of the bread the eldest will actually eat. Nobody asked you to hold all of this. You're just the one who does.

This is the *mental load* — the invisible work of noticing what needs doing, deciding how and when, remembering it through all the noise of a day, and making sure it actually happens. It is real work. It is exhausting in a way that's hard to point to, because at the end of it there's nothing to show: no clean kitchen, no finished report, just a head that never gets to be empty.

And — let's be honest about who's reading this — it is work that, in most homes, lands on women. Not because women are better at it or because men can't do it, but for a tangle of reasons that researchers have spent decades documenting and that this little book is not going to untangle. What this book *can* do is hand you a genuinely useful tool for carrying it, and — this is the part that matters most — for making it visible, lighter, and shareable.

That tool is an AI assistant. If that phrase makes you want to close the tab, stay with me. This is not a book about technology. It's a book about getting your head back. The AI is just the thing that helps.

A quick honesty note, because it sets the tone for everything: this book was written by an AI author working for Clarqo. That's not a gimmick. It means we'll be straight with you about what these tools

genuinely lift off your shoulders and where they're useless, because we use them every day and we've watched them fail in all the ordinary ways. No magic, no doom. Just a field guide.

If you've never really used an AI assistant before, you might want our companion guide *Hello, Claude* first — it covers the absolute basics. But you don't need it. We'll start gently here too.

Let's begin.

## 1 • The work no one sees

Before we fix it, it helps to see it clearly — because the first relief comes simply from naming the thing.

Sociologists who study this call it *cognitive labour*, and they've found it has parts. One researcher, Allison Daminger, watched how couples actually run their households and noticed the invisible work breaks into four moves that repeat all day long: you **anticipate** a need before it becomes a crisis (“we’re going to run out of nappies”), you **identify** the options (“which ones, from where, by when”), you **decide**, and then you **monitor** to make sure it actually got handled. Doing the task — the buying, the cooking, the driving — is only the last and most visible step. The other three happen in your head, silently, and never stop.

That’s why it’s so tiring and so invisible at the same time. The physical chores can be split, scheduled, even outsourced. But the *managing* of them — the holding of the whole moving list in your mind — usually doesn’t get split. It just sits with one person. Studies of household labour keep finding the same thing: even in homes where the visible chores are shared fairly, the mental load — the remembering, the planning, the worrying — tilts heavily onto women. There’s a well-known comic about this by an artist who signs herself Emma, called *You Should’ve Asked*, and that title is the whole problem in three words. The person carrying the load becomes the manager everyone else waits to be told by. “Just ask me and I’ll help” sounds generous. But being the one who always has to know what to ask for is *the load*.

None of this is a personal failing. You are not disorganised. You are doing a real, large, skilled job that happens to be invisible and happens to be unpaid and happens, statistically, to land on you.

Seeing it clearly is the first step. The rest of this book is about putting some of it down.

**One thing before we go on:** for the next few pages, every time you catch your mind reaching for something you mustn't forget, jot it on a scrap of paper or a note on your phone. Don't organise it. Just catch it. We're going to use that list in Chapter 5, and you'll be amazed how long it gets.

## 2 · What AI can lift — and what it can't

Let's be honest right away, because false promises are exhausting too.

**An AI assistant cannot do the dishes.** It cannot fold the washing, drive to the pharmacy, or hold a feverish toddler at three in the morning. The physical half of the load stays physical. Anyone who tells you a chatbot will empty your dishwasher is selling something.

But look back at Chapter 1. The *heaviest* part of the mental load wasn't the doing. It was the anticipating, the deciding, the remembering, the organising — the part that runs in your head and never clocks off. **That** part, an AI is genuinely, surprisingly good at lifting.

Here's the honest division of labour:

### What it lifts well:

- **Remembering and organising.** Tip the swirling list out of your head and let it hold, sort, and prioritise it. It never forgets and never sighs.
- **Planning and deciding.** Meal plans, packing lists, party logistics, the term's worth of school dates — it turns a vague dread into a concrete, ordered list in seconds.
- **Drafting the words.** The awkward email to the teacher, the message chasing the plumber, the note to the class WhatsApp — it writes a usable first draft so you're never starting from a blank, dreaded page.
- **Thinking it through.** When you're stuck or overwhelmed, it's an endlessly patient thinking partner that helps you see what

actually matters and what can wait.

**What it can't do:**

- The physical task itself.
- The relationships — the actual conversation with your child, the real apology, the love. Don't outsource those, and we'll come back to why in Chapter 8.
- Being right about everything. It makes confident mistakes. Chapter 8 is the whole safety briefing.

So set your expectations correctly and you'll never be disappointed: this won't give you a robot butler. It gives you something better suited to the actual problem — **a tireless personal assistant for the part of the work that lives in your head.** Think of it as the world's most patient chief-of-staff, who happens to live in a text box and works for free.

### 3 • Your first five minutes

You reach an assistant like Claude in one of two places: a website in any browser (for Claude, that's **claude.ai**), or an app on your phone or computer. Either is fine. You'll make a free account; that's normal.

What you'll see is a single text box. That box is the whole thing. Everything happens by writing to it like you'd write to a capable, patient friend — no special words, no commands.

Here is the one idea that makes it all click, and it's worth more than any clever trick: **talk to it the way you'd brief a brilliant new assistant who knows nothing about your family.** They're sharp and they're willing, but on day one they don't know your kids' names, your schedule, or that Grandma can't do Tuesdays. So you tell them. The more of the picture you hand over, the better the help that comes back.

Don't start with a test question. "What's the capital of France" makes it look like a toy. Start with something real and small that's actually on your plate. For instance:

*"I need to write a quick message to my son's teacher asking to move our parents' evening slot — we have a clash. Polite, short, grateful. Can you draft it?"*

Notice what you did: you gave it a job, a bit of context, and a constraint (polite, short). You'll have a usable draft in seconds. Too formal? Just say "warmer." Too long? "Cut it in half." You're now having a conversation, and that back-and-forth is the entire skill.

**Try this (3 minutes):** Pick the smallest word-shaped thing you've been putting off — a reply, a request, a note — and ask the

assistant to draft it. Then tell it two things to change. Feel how the steering works. That's everything.

## 4 • The four habits

People imagine talking to AI is some dark art with secret magic words. It isn't. There are four small habits, and once they're second nature you'll stop thinking about them.

**1. Give it the context.** It knows nothing about your life unless you say so. The gap between a useless answer and a brilliant one is almost always the context you provided. *“Plan a kids’ party”* gets you generic mush. *“Help me plan a 6th birthday party for my daughter Mia. About 12 children, our small flat plus the courtyard, budget tight, two of the kids have nut allergies, and I have zero time. Keep it simple”* gets you something you can actually use.

**2. Say exactly what you want back.** A list? A calendar? Three options? A message under 100 words? Tell it the shape you need. *“Give me a week of dinners as a simple table, with a shopping list grouped by aisle.”* Vague in, vague out.

**3. Show it an example when you can.** Want a message in your tone? Paste one you wrote before and say *“in this style.”* Want the meal plan to look like the one that worked last month? Paste it. One example beats a paragraph of instructions.

**4. Don't restart — steer.** When an answer is 80% right, *don't* open a fresh chat and try again. Just say what to change: *“Swap the fish night for something the kids will eat,”* *“make Thursday quicker, we have swimming.”* It remembers everything in the current conversation, so each reply builds on the last. This is the habit people miss, and it's the one that turns a good tool into a great one.

That's the whole craft: **context, specifics, examples, steering.** Everything else is decoration.

And one freeing idea to end the chapter: **you can't break it, and there's no stupid question.** The single most powerful move in this whole book is to make *it* do the asking:

*“Before you help me plan this, ask me whatever you need to know so it actually fits my life.”*

Watch what happens. Instead of guessing, it interviews you — and suddenly it's pulling the load out of your head *for* you, one good question at a time.

## 5 • The brain dump

This is the most important chapter in the book. If you only ever learn one thing from it, learn this.

The mental load is heaviest when it's a swirl — a hundred half-thoughts circling at once, none of them written down, each one afraid that if you stop holding it you'll forget it. The single most relieving thing you can do is **empty the swirl into the assistant and let it become a list.**

It's called a brain dump, and it works like this. Open the assistant and just... pour it out. Don't organise. Don't punctuate. Don't be tidy. Type or talk it exactly as it falls out of your head:

*"I'm overwhelmed. Help me get this out of my head and sorted. Here's everything spinning around: dentist for both kids, Tom's shoes too small, mother-in-law birthday next week need present, school trip form due, run out of Mia's bread, car needs servicing sometime, thank-you notes from the party, fix the dripping tap, book summer holiday before prices go up, Tom's reading record not signed, need a gift for Saturday's party, call the bank about the card. That's most of it."*

Then ask it to do the sorting you don't have the bandwidth for:

*"Sort this into: do today, do this week, can wait. Flag anything with a deadline I might be missing. And tell me which two things, if I did them first, would take the most weight off."*

What comes back is the thing you could never quite do at 11pm with a tired brain: the swirl, turned into an ordered, finite, *visible* list. Finite is the magic word. A list has an end. The swirl doesn't. Just

seeing it bounded — “it’s eleven things, not a thousand, and only three are urgent” — loosens something in your chest.

Make it a ritual. A five-minute brain dump on a Sunday evening turns the vague dread of the week ahead into a plan. Some people do a tiny one every morning. And because the assistant remembers within a conversation, you can come back and say “*I did the dentist and the forms, what’s left?*” and it keeps the running list for you — so the list lives in the tool, not in your head.

**Try this:** Get the scrap of paper from Chapter 1 — the things you caught yourself trying not to forget. Dump all of it into the assistant right now and ask it to sort it as above. This is the moment the book stops being theory.

## 6 • The household command centre

Once the brain dump is a habit, the assistant becomes the place you run the practical machinery of a household. None of these are clever. They're just the invisible jobs, made lighter. Pick the ones that match your life.

**The week's meals.** The eternal question — *what's for dinner* — answered for a whole week in one go. *“Plan five weeknight dinners. Two of us and three kids, one's a fussy eater, we're vegetarian-ish, nothing that takes more than 30 minutes on a school night, and use up the chicken and spinach I already have. Give me the plan and a shopping list grouped by aisle.”* Adjust forever after: *“Tuesday's too slow, swap it.”*

**The paperwork avalanche.** Photograph the crumpled letter from school and ask *“what is this actually asking me to do, and by when?”* Forward the long, confusing thread and ask *“what's being decided and what do they need from me?”* The forms, the permission slips, the council letter in officialese — hand them over and ask for the plain version and the deadline.

**The gift and birthday brain.** The endless background hum of *whose birthday is coming and what do I get them.* Tell it the person, the occasion, the budget, what they're like, and ask for five ideas you can actually buy. Keep a running list in one conversation: *“Here are the birthdays this term and the people — help me get ahead of them.”*

**The logistics juggle.** *“Wednesday is chaos: Mia has swimming at 4 across town, Tom needs collecting at 3:30, I have a call till 3:45, and dinner has to happen before swimming. Help me work out a plan that's actually possible — and tell me what I should ask*

*someone else to cover.*” That last clause matters: it’s allowed to tell you what to delegate.

**The dreaded message.** The chasing email. The “no” you’ve been avoiding. The complaint to the company. The careful note to a touchy relative. Describe the situation and the tone you want, and let it draft. Fixing a draft is easy; facing a blank page is what we put off.

**The decision you keep circling.** Big or small, when you’re going round and round — the school choice, the holiday, whether to say yes to the thing — try *“I keep going back and forth on this. Don’t decide for me; ask me the questions that’ll make my own thinking clearer.”* It won’t take the decision off you. It’ll just clear the fog around it.

**Try this:** Choose the one above that’s pressing on you *today* and do it for real. The fastest way to trust this is to feel it take one real thing off your plate.

## 7 • Making it shareable

Here's the chapter that does more than lighten the load. It helps you *redistribute* it — and that's the thing that actually changes a home.

Remember the trap from Chapter 1: the load stays stuck on one person because all the *knowing* lives in that person's head. Your partner says “just tell me what to do” — but the telling, the keeping of the master list, the remembering to remember, is itself the heaviest part. You can't hand off a job that exists only as a swirl behind your eyes. So the first move in sharing the load is to **make it visible** — to get it out of your head and into something another person can actually pick up. And making-things-visible is exactly what the assistant is for.

Try this. After a brain dump, ask:

*“Turn this into a simple shared checklist anyone in the family could pick up — clear enough that my partner could take half of it without asking me a single follow-up question. Group it by who could own each thing.”*

Now you have an artefact — a real, external list — instead of a lecture. You can put it on the fridge, paste it into a shared note, or send it over. The conversation changes from “*you never help*” (which starts a fight) to “*here's the list, which half do you want?*” (which starts a negotiation). The assistant can even help you have *that* conversation: “*Help me explain to my partner, without it turning into a row, that the planning and remembering is invisible work and I need to genuinely share it — not just be helped.' Give me a calm way in.*”

The same move works for anyone you can lean on. A checklist a grandparent can follow for the school run. A clear set of instructions so a babysitter doesn't need to text you six times. A standing "how our house runs" document — bedtimes, allergies, the wifi password, who to call — that means the knowledge isn't trapped in one head anymore.

This is the deepest use of the tool in this whole book. It's not really about productivity. It's about taking a load that was invisible and solitary and turning it into something that can be seen, named, and carried together. That's worth more than any meal plan.

## 8 · When it's wrong, and what to keep human

Two warnings, and they matter, so here they are in plain bold.

**First: the assistant can be confidently, completely wrong, and it won't warn you.** It doesn't look facts up in a guaranteed-correct database; it composes the most likely-sounding answer. Usually likely-sounding is also true, which is why it's right so often. But sometimes the natural-sounding sentence is simply false, and it'll say it with the same calm certainty as a true one. So:

- For things where being slightly wrong is harmless — a meal idea, a party theme, a draft you'll read anyway — trust it freely.
- For things where wrong is costly — a medical dose, a legal or visa deadline, a school cut-off, money — **use it to get organised, then verify the fact with the real source.** Treat it as a brilliant assistant who's occasionally mistaken, never as the final authority.
- When it gives you a specific figure or date that matters, ask *“how sure are you, and how would I check that?”* It's surprisingly honest when you invite it to doubt itself.

**Second, and gentler: don't outsource the things that are supposed to be yours.** It can draft the birthday message, but the love in it is your job. It can help you plan the hard conversation, but it shouldn't have the conversation. It can suggest what to say to a sad child, but your child needs *you*, not a script. The whole point of putting down the invisible admin is to have more of yourself left over for the parts that can't be delegated — the bedtime story, the real listening, the being-there. Use the tool to protect those, not to replace them.

A few quick habits to stay safe and comfortable:

- **Don't paste real secrets** — full bank details, passwords, ID numbers. And be thoughtful about your children's private information; share what you must to get help, no more.
- **Check your privacy settings once.** Whether your conversations may be used to improve the system depends on your account type and settings, and the details change — so treat the assistant's own privacy page as the source of truth.
- **It's a starting point, not a professional.** For anything touching health, money, or the law, it helps you prepare and understand — it doesn't replace the doctor, the accountant, or the lawyer.

None of this makes it less useful. A thinking partner that's right most of the time and that you know when to double-check is enormously useful. The skill isn't avoiding the wrong answers — it's knowing which answers to check.

## 9 · Your first week

Habits beat intentions. Here's a gentle seven-day plan — five minutes a day — to make this part of how you run your life.

- **Day 1 — The brain dump.** Do a full one (Chapter 5). Let it sort the swirl. Notice how it feels to see the list end.
- **Day 2 — One dreaded message.** Pick the email or text you've been avoiding and let it draft. Send it.
- **Day 3 — The week's dinners.** Plan five nights and get the grouped shopping list. Cook from it.
- **Day 4 — A piece of paperwork.** Photograph one confusing letter or form and ask what it needs and by when.
- **Day 5 — Get ahead of one thing.** A birthday, a trip, an event — ask it to help you plan the thing that's been quietly looming.
- **Day 6 — Make it shareable.** Turn a brain dump into a checklist someone else could take half of. Actually share it.
- **Day 7 — A wrong answer.** Ask it something factual and check the answer against the real source. Build the instinct that keeps you safe.

After a week, you won't be reading a book about a tool anymore. You'll just be someone whose head is a little quieter.

## 10 • Where to go next

You now have everything you need. The four habits — context, specifics, examples, steering — and the two big moves — the brain dump and making-it-shareable — carry you the whole way, no matter how the tools change.

A few directions when you're ready:

- **Make a Project.** When something becomes ongoing — a house move, a new baby, managing a parent's care — most assistants let you create a "Project" or workspace that holds the background once so you stop re-explaining. Put the standing facts in there; every chat inside it already knows them.
- **Try voice.** Talking instead of typing changes everything for a brain dump — it's more like thinking out loud with someone while you do the washing up.
- **Build your "how our house runs" document.** Slowly, over a few weeks, let it help you write down the things only you currently know. The goal isn't a perfect system. It's that the knowledge stops living in only one head.

And here's the real milestone — not a feature, a feeling. It's the first evening you sit down and realise your mind isn't running its endless background list, because the list is somewhere safe and you trust it'll be there tomorrow. That quiet is the whole point. Everything in this book is just how you get to it. Welcome to a lighter head.

## Appendix · A pocket prompt cheat-sheet

Steal these. Replace the bracketed bits. Say them like you'd say them to a person.

**The brain dump** > “I’m overwhelmed and need to get this out of my head. Here’s everything spinning around: [pour it all out, messily]. Sort it into do-today / this-week / can-wait, flag anything with a deadline, and tell me the two things that would take the most weight off.”

**Make it ask first** > “Before you help with this, ask me whatever you need so the result actually fits my life.”

**The week’s dinners** > “Plan [number] weeknight dinners for [who, ages, likes/dislikes, diet]. Nothing over [time] on a school night. Use up the [ingredients] I have. Give me the plan and a shopping list grouped by aisle.”

**Decode the paperwork** > “Here’s a letter/form/email. Tell me in plain words what it’s actually asking me to do, and by when. [paste or describe]”

**The dreaded message** > “Help me write a [short / warm / firm] message to [who] about [what]. The situation: [context]. I want to sound [tone].”

**Get ahead of an occasion** > “Help me plan [birthday / trip / event] for [who, when, budget, constraints]. Ask me what you need, then give me a simple plan and a checklist.”

**Make the load shareable** > “Turn this into a simple shared checklist my [partner / family] could pick up without asking me follow-up questions. Group it by who could own each part.”

**The decision you keep circling** > “I keep going back and forth on [decision]. Don’t decide for me — ask me the questions that’ll make my own thinking clearer.”

**Check before you trust** > “How sure are you about that, and how would I verify it myself?”

# Appendix · Sources & further reading

This guide's claims about the mental load draw on published research on household and cognitive labour. The AI features described were checked against Anthropic's public help pages on 4 June 2026; product surfaces, limits and privacy wording change, so check the current pages before relying on exact details.

On the mental load and cognitive labour:

- Allison Daminger, “The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor,” *American Sociological Review* (2019) — the research behind the four components of invisible work (anticipate, identify, decide, monitor).
- Emma, *You Should've Asked* (2017) — the widely shared comic that put the phrase “mental load” into everyday language.
- Eve Rodsky, *Fair Play* (2019) — a practical system for naming and redistributing invisible household work between partners.
- Allison Daminger, “Gendered Anticipation: How Couples Think About Their Children's Futures” and related work on how cognitive labour divides along gender lines.

On using an AI assistant (the basics):

- *Hello, Claude* — Clarqo's companion field guide for absolute beginners, free at [clarqo.com/books](https://clarqo.com/books).
- [Intro to Claude](#) — Anthropic's overview of what the assistant can do.
- [What are Projects?](#) — current behaviour of Projects/workspaces for holding standing context.
- [Is my data used for model training?](#) — Anthropic's current privacy explanation.

# Colophon

**The Invisible Load** — A Clarqo Field Guide by June Calloway

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