

Balancing Work and Family: Taking a Look at Yourself

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Are You Beginning to Burn Out?

Do you come home from work physically or emotionally drained, with little energy left for your family? Do you find it difficult to get out of bed every day knowing that you face an overwhelming workload?

Do you suffer from headaches, backaches, digestive upsets, fatigue or exhaustion that can be traced to your problems at work? Are you drinking too much coffee, smoking too many cigarettes, eating too much or unable to fall asleep at night due to work-related anxiety?

Do you feel like you're always behind schedule or wish you could just quit your job? Have major changes, such as layoffs and reorganization, taken place where you work?

If so, you may be among tens of millions of people in the United States who suffer from job and family-related stress, a problem that's far more common than either workers or employers have previously realized.

A lot of people are bowing out of the rat race—or at least contemplating it. Time magazine, in the article "The Simple Life," touts the return to basic values and the joys of home life as a "revolution in progress" and a major shift in America's private agenda.

After the rampant materialism of the '80s, many people are realizing that what matters is having time for family and friends, rest and recreation, good deeds and spirituality. For some people that means a radical step: changing one's career, living on less, or packing up and moving to a quieter place. For others it can mean something as subtle as choosing a cheaper brand of running shoes or leaving work a little earlier to watch the kids in a soccer game.

Most people must consider the financial consequences of work and family trade-offs. But even if there is no choice about whether or not to work, we can choose to select an employer who is sensitive to issues important in balancing work and family. We can also help educate the workplace and move toward family-friendly policies.

What Can I Do to Make Things Go Better?

The following tips can help you take control of the homefront and reduce as much tension as possible during stressful times.

If you find yourself frazzled with the balancing act, most likely your children will sense that and react strongly to your frustrations. Keep in mind that balancing work and family touches individuals without children too. Elder care, family crises and individual special needs are also demanding.

Avoid the Morning Rush

Start Going to Bed and Getting Up Earlier.

Move bedtime up by 15 minutes at a time until you adjust to the schedule you want. It may take your body a few weeks to adapt to retiring earlier, but in the long run, it will be easier for you to rise at an earlier time.

Place All Items You Need in One Familiar Location.

Place near the door your keys, briefcase, purse, school supplies, important papers and letters to be mailed. Keep a petty cash fund handy for all those times that you or a child needs to take money for a parking meter, lunch.

Make Clothing Choices for the Next Day.

Laying clothes out the night before helps make morning dressing easier and hassle free.

Pull Yourself From Your Pillow at Least 1-1/2 Hours Prior to Leaving for Work.

A few more minutes added to your morning preparation time can prevent frantic dressing, no breakfast and forgotten tasks that need to be done before leaving for work.

Rise First and Dress Before Waking Others.

Time alone in the morning can be just what you need to get yourself together without bumping into others or being interrupted.

Have Children Make Their Lunches.

If old enough, have children prepare their lunches the night before to save you time and get them involved in food preparation.

Encourage Your Spouse to Share in the Morning Tasks.

Have your spouse assist with the morning and evening tasks so that all the responsibility doesn't fall on one person.

Take Time for Breakfast.

Set the breakfast table the night before -- a good task for a younger child. Sit down for 15 minutes and eat a light, wholesome breakfast. If you're on the run,

~~Set the breakfast table the night before~~ – a good task for a younger child. Sit down for 10 minutes and eat a light, wholesome breakfast. If you're on the run, grab a piece of fruit, cheese and crackers, a muffin or a small sandwich to eat while commuting or during a morning break.

Set Your Clocks Ahead.

It may be psychological, but having your clocks and watches set 5 to 10 minutes ahead can keep you on schedule.

Reward Yourself for Arriving at Work on Time.

You'll be surprised how good you feel when you arrive at work on time and relaxed! Later, treat yourself to something you would not normally do: a relaxing bath, a visit with friends or reading a new novel.

Remember:

- Allow family members to have some choices about the tasks that need to be done.
 - Vary the tasks so no one person is overwhelmed or bored with helping out.
 - Examine your standards. Avoid becoming a perfectionist.
 - Avoid doing for children what they can do for themselves, as long as it's age appropriate.
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Mealtimes Suggestions

1. Rather than spending time and energy on coaxing children to eat, know what foods they dislike and try to prepare what they do like.
2. Avoid some mealtime struggles by having children help shop, plan and prepare the meal.
3. Provide nutritious snacks and serve nutritious appetizers before dinner to give you time to prepare the meal.
4. Whenever cooking, make two of each item, one that can be frozen and used at a later date. This works especially well for soups, stews and hot meals.
5. Pack lunches the night before.

Bedtime

1. Be consistent about scheduled bedtime.
2. Develop routines that help children get ready for bed (cleanup time, brush teeth, story time, bedtime).
3. If children are not sleepy, tell them they must stay in the room and read a book or do quiet activities until lights out.
4. Have a TV cutoff time.

Clothing

1. Let children wear the same outfit more than once. Only wash dirty clothes.
2. Pack the diaper bag ahead of time and rotate the responsibility.

General

1. Read your children's papers when they show them to you. Post them!
 2. Complete all forms and set in a safe place to be returned the next day.
 3. Keep a bulletin board for messages, receipts and other important papers.
 4. Hold weekly family meetings.
 5. Designate special times with each child for your partner and for yourself.
 6. Rotate toys monthly. Use shelves to display toys rather than a toy box.
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How do I begin?

A. Plan

- What needs to be done? Make a list.
- What can other family members do? Consider age, size, knowledge.
- What are they willing to try? Talk it over and keep trying.

B. Do

- Do they need help? Explain and show them with patience.
 - Too much? Work with each person until everyone is comfortable.
 - Need to make changes? Set a time to review and make changes so everyone learns a variety of tasks.
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The Homecoming

Keep the following tips in mind.

Commuting Time.

The time it takes to get from work to home can be very helpful in making the transition. Some people use this time to finish thinking about what's been

happening at work and to shift gears and make plans for responsibilities at home. When they get home, they are mentally organized to get started. Others use commuting time to listen to music or read a book. Commuting time can be an hour in traffic or a 10-minute walk to work. This time can be devoted to a pleasant activity without feeling guilty about home or work demands.

Helping Each Other.

Good communication is important between family members about what needs to be done and who needs to do it. An open discussion will help each member understand the other people's roles and feelings. Children can also be given tasks that will help the family accomplish what needs to be done in a relatively short time. This sharing of tasks not only teaches children responsibility but also gives them a sense of belonging.

Changing Clothes.

The simple action of changing clothes can make the transition from work to home easier. A different set of clothes can make you feel like you're finally home since work and home often require different roles and behaviors. Being dressed for the job at hand makes the transition complete.

A Quick Snack.

A nutritious snack will help relieve family members' hunger. With a little planning, this snack could be the first course of your dinner -- salad, soup, crackers and cheese. This snack will give you extra time to prepare a family meal.

When families reassemble at home, anything can happen.

- The family is hungry.
 - Family members may be irritated after a particularly frustrating day. It is safe to fall apart at home.
 - Household tasks need to be done -- open mail, change clothes, start dinner and throw in a load of wash.
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FS-513, Reviewed and Reprinted July 1994

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