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Work and Family: Today's Juggling Act

Working families are under stress as they try to balance demands of job, children and spouse. Strategies are needed to prevent stress overload and burnout.

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Over the past 25 years, women's and men's roles have changed dramatically. Today's women are better educated, have better paying jobs and are having fewer children. Women represent 45 percent of the labor force, nearly 80 percent work outside the home and 75 percent of mothers of young children are employed.

As women have entered and stayed in the work force in ever-increasing numbers, the dual-earner family has emerged. Married couple earners comprise more than 70 percent of the labor force. The average working wife contributes 35-40 percent of her family's annual income; among wives who work year-round, the average contribution is greater than 40 percent.

Economic conditions in the 1990s have contributed more to the ever-increasing numbers of women in the work force than any other factor. Inflation, the desire for a higher living standard, an unemployed partner, and the desire to be gainfully employed contribute to the economic "push" for women to work.

Like men, women work because it has become part of their definition of self. They work to obtain status, to be independent, to have an income, and to be successful in their careers. Women also work because they must — more than one family in four is headed by a single, divorced or widowed woman.

For whatever reason, more people than ever are trying to have both a career and a family life.

Today's couples are asking themselves when they should have children; whose job should take precedence and when; and how to give home, children and marriage the time and devotion they need. As individuals attempt to juggle two jobs and a family, they often try to become "superpersons," wanting it all, having it all, and doing it all. Surviving two jobs and parenthood may well be the acid test of the 21st century.

Stress Spillover

The worlds of work and home are not separate; research indicates a profound mutual impact between work and home life. As large numbers of married couples and single parents work outside the home and have parenting responsibilities, concern over the stress caused by these multiple roles has grown. The combination of work and family roles generates a spillover of stressful experiences in these two areas.

Spillover occurs when the demands of work and family roles are incompatible, in that the demands of one role affect participation in the other. There can be work-to-family spillover and family-to-work spillover. Spillover can have both positive and negative effects.

Work-to-family spillover is defined as the impact the employee's role at work has on his or her ability to function in the family role. *Family-to-work spillover* refers to the effect that the employee's family environment has on his or her ability to meet work demands.

One research study showed that home-to-work spillover is more common among men than women. Women seem better able to avoid bringing home stress into the workplace. This may be due to the different socialization of males and females with regard to housework and child care. Even though women perform the majority of household chores, they do not show these burdens in terms of increased stress in the workplace.

Work-to-home spillover was found to be more powerful than home-to-work spillover, and, once again, was stronger for men than women. For example, a husband's demanding day at work increases the chances he will not be as effective a partner or father that evening.

There can be *work-to-home crossover* as well — when an overload at work for one person results in an overload at home for the other person (i.e., when a person experiences stress at home as the result of his/her spouse having a bad day at work). For example, a woman has a very stressful day at work, then goes home and argues with her husband that evening, causing stress for him at home.

There is a "ripple effect" found with work-to-home stress crossover. Women are more likely than their husbands to increase their work at home in response to their spouses' hectic day at work. Men do not increase their work levels at home on days their wives have experienced overloads at work, even though women reduce their involvement with housework on these days. Therefore, women often defer their housework to another day.

Balancing Work and Family Assessment

Balancing work and family is both a female and male issue. It's much like trying to juggle balls of many different colors and sizes. Often a person isn't sure how many are up in the air, or what color or size they are, or which to catch next.

If families are going to be a nurturing place to raise children, if individuals are going to be successful

and/or satisfied in their careers, and if people truly are going to introduce some balance into their lives, everyone needs to periodically assess what and how they are doing.

The following are some questions to ask yourself as you strive for balance. Think carefully and answer honestly, according to your real life situation: **Most of the time = 4; Some of the time = 3; Not as often as I should = 2; Rarely, if ever = 1.**

To what extent:

- _____ Are you currently creating a balance between personal, couple, family and career goals?
- _____ Do you schedule quiet, rejuvenating time for yourself each day?
- _____ Do you exercise vigorously three times a week? (20-30 minutes each time?)
- _____ Do you regularly share affection with significant others?
- _____ Do you regularly discuss the allocation of individual and family resources (time, money, skills, possessions, personal qualities, support networks) to most efficiently use them to meet individual and family needs and goals?
- _____ Do you use community resources, such as quality day care; flexible work schedules; religious and spiritual support?
- _____ Have you learned to communicate and manage conflict skillfully?
- _____ Are you able to use a collaborative, step-by-step, problem-solving plan when problems arise?
- _____ Do you have a "family time" budget that works?
- _____ Do you schedule time, daily and weekly, separately for spouse and/or each child?
- _____ Are you flexible and responsible regarding household chores?
- _____ Do you leave your job worries at the office and your family worries at home?

Scoring:

- 42-48 You are doing extremely well.
- 36-42 You are coping okay.
- 30-36 You are muddling along.
- 24-30 Oops! The imbalance is getting greater.
- 23 or less No balance in you life. Get some help.

The consequences of not being able to achieve a balance between the worlds of work and family are serious. Men and women are faced with the difficult task of somehow maintaining a sense of identity, while permitting themselves to nurture and develop a sense of teamwork and cohesion with both partner and children. The demands of work pull them away from family intimacy while the demands of family pull them into it. Either extreme can be problematic for individuals and their intimate relationships.

If this is the case, families need to adopt some strategies to help them manage their juggling act so they don't "drop too many balls."

Strategy 1. Adapt to change. Adapting to any demand for change is a necessary task. Responsibilities of household chores need to be shared by everyone. Husbands can increase their share of tasks and

increase time caring for children. Redistribution of tasks is most useful for working moms. The long-term payoff will benefit all family members through reduced stress and increased family time. It can benefit the husband through increased marital satisfaction if he is supportive and helpful.

Strategy 2. Adjust your expectations. Adjusting expectations about the ideals of family life, and how well each household task must be performed, is a must. Yet many working women have difficulty allowing their children or spouse to do tasks according to their own standards and according to their own time. Some previously held standards must be given up. Some will need to be compromised.

Ask yourself, how often does the floor really need to be swept? Can my children learn to do their own laundry? Do I have to attend every activity associated with my job? Do I really have to work overtime this weekend? Must I be on time for every event in which my child is involved?

Determine the things that are really necessary, and those that are optional in work and family life.

Strategy 3. Commit to your job. Job demands for time and energy are great. Research shows that if husband and wife agree their jobs or careers are what they really want to be doing, it is more likely they both will be satisfied. The outcome is greater satisfaction and less tension at home. For most individuals, job fulfillment and satisfaction are important in managing stress.

Strategy 4. Get your family's support. Women are more likely to be satisfied if their spouses are supportive of their work outside the home, but resentment or resistance to Mom working may appear. Children who drag their feet in the morning, miss the school bus, or forget to make their lunch may be sabotaging the system.

Extended family support is also helpful. Grandparents who criticize a parent for "not being home with the children" undermine the confidence that working parents need in order to manage. In case of divorce, support or non-support for an ex-spouse has an impact on the ability to have satisfaction in both work and family.

Strategy 5. Take time for yourself. Another challenge working families face is time management. Studies consistently show that working mothers manage time by reducing their sleep and eliminating their personal time. Employed mothers have virtually no free time for themselves.

Men are more likely than women to engage in leisure or sports activities. When men do take time for themselves and women cannot, this may create an "imbalance" in the family. This imbalance may arise when the husband has personal time that his wife wants, but cannot take, resulting in resentment.

The psychologist Maslow included solitude and recreation as two elements in his "hierarchy of needs." Taking time for ourselves can be a critical source of renewal. **Me** time is very necessary and legitimate and can provide bottom-line benefits for everyone.

Strategy 6. Take time for your children. Children need guidance, love, nurturing and discipline. It is important for parents to attend school and other activities with them. It is important that parents listen to and talk with children. It is important that families work together and play together. It is necessary for parents to teach children the values and ideals they deem important, because if parents don't, children will adopt someone else's.

If parents expect children to grow up to become mature, responsible adults, they cannot give their children "left-over" time. It must be **prime time!**

Schedule at least 10 minutes a day to talk with each child. Schedule 30 minutes each week to do something with each child that the child wants to do.

Strategy 7. Take time for your spouse. One of the things most likely to weaken a marriage is the inability to balance commitment to work with commitment to your marriage and to your spouse's needs. Studies show the demands of work — either out of devotion or necessity — can seriously undermine the marital bond. People are too tired and worn out to be good partners.

Since choosing either work or intimacy is out of the question for those committed to their relationship, couples must learn to keep this tension creative and not destructive. What can couples do to meet the challenge of the work/marriage struggle? Take time for the relationship. Have a "date night" once every couple of weeks, away from home without the kids.

Do not make work an idol. If work is boring and tedious, it can drive a wedge between partners. If it is time- and mind-consuming, even if glamorous and profitable, it can divide a couple as one person's ego feeds on a career. Work and marriage are both transcendent activities — they bid people to go beyond themselves to serve.

Strategy 8. Use high quality child care. There is probably no greater resource, no greater cost that has a higher payoff, than high quality child care. Researchers have found that the parent, particularly the mother, experiences less guilt and stress at work if high quality child care is available.

When children spend more waking hours with the caregiver than with the parent, the high quality child care that uses age-appropriate activities in a quality environment is especially crucial. This is the time the child is developing intellectual, social, emotional and physical skills.

In many caregiving situations, there are not enough trained adults for the number of infants and children. Some children suffer from simple neglect. Some caregivers are undependable and many are disinclined to provide any activity or entertainment except to plop the child in front of the TV set.

Tips For Being A "Good Enough" Working Parent

Working parents usually are overworked and stressed out and trying to juggle too many roles. They often feel guilty about the lack of time with their children. Since no one can be a perfect parent, here's how parents and children can live with lower expectations:

- **Don't set your standards too high.** Although parents must be vigilant when their children's safety is concerned, their goal should be diligence, not perfection. That should apply to household chores as well. Don't set standards so high that neither you, your spouse, nor your children can measure up.
- **Give yourself a break.** As long as you do your best to be a careful and responsible parent, you can relax and enjoy your work, your children, and your spouse. Don't blame yourself every time something goes wrong. You're not an inadequate or bad parent because your child isn't perfect.
- **Learn from your mistakes.** Don't erase mistakes from your memory bank; think about what happened. You and your children both should learn from errors. By reviewing your blunders, you can learn to recognize your weak spots and try to compensate for them.
- **Hang on to your sense of humor.** Raising children is serious business, but you have to laugh at

yourself or you are sunk. Laughter is good medicine, the only all-purpose human antidote. It doesn't cure parental imperfections, but it can help heal wounded pride.

The common threads running through the challenges and strategies in balancing work and family are **attitude** and **communication**. Attitude toward work and family — seeing the glass as half full or half empty — plays a big role in how well people can adjust and adapt to meet pressing demands. Families must **communicate**, must talk openly about what they think and how they feel. Family members must learn to listen so they can understand how others think and feel.

Stress Overload and Burnout

Stress overload comes from not having enough resources to cope, or not being able to use them effectively. When stress piles up over time and becomes chronic, people can begin to suffer physical and psychological symptoms of burnout.

Burnout is a hidden killer that can strike when you least expect it. It is important to detect the early symptoms and bounce back before burnout gains the upper hand.

In the following burnout quiz, evaluate yourself as to **how much change** you have experienced in each area during the past few months. *1 = little or no change; 2 = some change; 3 = moderate change; 4 = quite a bit of change; 5 = a great deal of change.*

- _____ **Productivity.** Does producing high-quality results still come as second nature to you, or are you working harder to get less done?
- _____ **Stamina.** Do you still feel energetic and hearty, or do you tire more easily?
- _____ **Happiness.** Are you consistently happy, or are you sometimes invaded by sadness you can't explain?
- _____ **Outlook.** Are you becoming increasingly cynical and disenchanted, or are you quite positive?
- _____ **Appearance.** Are people telling you that you look tired or ill, or do you appear rested and well?
- _____ **Interpersonal relations.** Do you take pleasure in talking to others, or have you become more irritable, short-tempered or disappointed with the people around you?
- _____ **Time demands.** Are you still able to pace yourself comfortably, or are tasks - even small, routine ones - starting to pile up?
- _____ **Health.** Are you suffering more frequently from aches, pains, headaches, stomach upsets or colds, or do you feel mostly healthy?
- _____ **Resiliency.** Are you able to respond flexibly to different situations, or do you feel disoriented when the flow of daily activity is halted or interrupted?
- _____ **Sex drive.** Have you become less interested in lovemaking, or are you satisfied with this aspects of your relationship?

Scoring. Total your points and then compare with this scale:

- 0-20 You're not burning out.
- 21-30 Watch yourself in the areas in which you've scored high.
- 31-40 You're a likely candidate for burnout.
- 41 or more It's definitely time to begin taking corrective measures.

Rules for Coping

To adequately meet the demands of work and family with current resources, and to enjoy choices made, people must reduce the potential for stress and burnout. Here are 10 ideas to help working parents cope and adjust to their changing roles and changing demands:

1. **Minimize your travel to and from job.** Avoid missing out on important waking hours you could spend with your children, your spouse, or for yourself.
2. **Get household help,** if you can possibly swing it financially.
3. **Shift tasks to the workday.** Shift errands and other routines to the lunch hour if they can be efficiently accomplished.
4. **Look for shortcuts,** in meal planning and preparation, in purchasing gifts (buying gift certificates), by doing several tasks in one errand.
5. **Spend time with the kids.** Be protective of the time available to spend with your children. Don't let other activities or work get in the way.
6. **Cut down on extracurricular** at work and in the community that extend the eight-hour workday.
7. **Get up early in the morning.** Spend some time for yourself. Most people are at their best during early hours.
8. **Couples need time together.** Work out a schedule to make sure your relationship gets the care it deserves.

A successful balancing act requires cooperation and teamwork. It requires knowing your strengths and limitations. Try to remember that being a working parent isn't a giant test or competition. This is your child's childhood. This is your marriage. This is your life. Try to relax and enjoy yourself.

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