

family & WORK

a delicate balance

L.D. Hall

• *Your boss wants a special report finished. You have to work tonight when your daughter plays her first soccer game. She's disappointed. You're feeling trapped between wanting to be a good parent and a valued employee.*

• *You cleaned the kitchen last night preparing for tonight's dinner guests. This morning, the kids spilled juice on the floor. You yelled at them, cleaned the floor, and left for work feeling angry. You even snapped at your co-workers.*

• *Your elderly father needs help to stay in his own home. You know it's best for him to remain there, but you resent the demands he makes. He calls you at work often and it affects your performance. You are concerned about your job security.*

If you're feeling that your life is out of control and that you can't please your boss, your family, or yourself, you're stressed. This is common when adults are working outside the home and trying to meet the demands of family life. It's a delicate balance between family and work, and sometimes all of us feel frustrated, angry, disappointed, and depressed.

Leslie D. Hall, graduate student in human development and family studies, Oregon State University. Adapted with permission from *Balancing Work and Family*, by Stephen Duncan, Montana State University Extension Service (1990).

In a growing number of families, all the adults in the family are employed in the labor market. This has the potential for increasing work and family stress.

Stress is cumulative, adding up over time. Think of the little hassles that often seem more overwhelming than big things:

- A spilled cup of coffee on a clean shirt
- A low gas tank when you're in a hurry
- An unexpected no-school snow day for your child
- A lost umbrella on a rainy day

Stress is also personal. It's related to changes happening in your life (e.g., job loss, wedding, vacation, moving); your efforts to meet others' expectations; and your health. Stress is increased by too little sleep, lack of exercise, infrequent personal time, and insufficient income. Excessive alcohol and work demands also add to stress.

If stress is not managed, you may become overwhelmed. This can result in emotional exhaustion and negative feelings. Fortunately, there are ways to cope with work and family stress.



Coping with work and family stress

Here are some suggestions for coping with work and family stress. Different things will work for different families, depending on the individuals and their situations.

You can reduce demands and be more efficient by setting goals, sharing tasks, learning to deal with conflict, and communicating with others. For example, in the area of housework, you can reduce your standards of cleanliness, or maybe get a partner to do half the cleaning. A relative may agree to share child care and/or housework. Compromising often works well. This involves sharing and listening to each family member's desires and expectations.

Stress often is the result of conflict between two or more of the following: (a) what you expect of yourself, (b) what others expect of you, and (c) what you actually do. It's important to define clearly who you want to be in your personal, family, and work lives.

Achieving a balance between work and family life will mean different things to different people. Some may want to devote equal amounts of time and energy to family, paid work, and leisure. Others may want to devote most of their non-work time to family, leisure, or volunteer activities. It's important to achieve a balance that's comfortable for you and your family.



- Your situation may seem hopeless. It's not easy, but one way to deal with a difficult situation is to redefine or reframe it so that you see it in a different way. You may be able to see some good in your situation. For example, seeing it as temporary—

knowing it will change when your children are older or you have a different job—may make it easier to tolerate.

- Plan, organize, and do things efficiently. For instance, get a task done and spend time with a family member by cooking together.
- Be realistic. You're only human! Redefine what you expect of yourself. Maybe you can reduce the time you spend doing household chores by sharing the work or by lowering your standards. It may help to reduce any clutter in your home, work place, and life.

Resources and strategies for decreasing stress

Decreasing your stress and enhancing your life depend upon: (a) resources, (b) strategies, and (c) attitudes. Following are some ideas that may help.

Personal resources and strategies

- Get to know what you want in life and how you respond to stress by thinking alone, keeping a journal, or talking with friends. This may help you in making decisions and knowing how you will respond to stressful situations.
- Watch how others at home and at work respond to stress so that you can be helpful to them as well.
- The few who have an adequate income may hire household help. This may save time and relieve some stress.
- Take care of your physical health. This makes you better able to withstand both physical and emotional stress.

Family resources and strategies

- If you have a partner, nurture your relationship with him or her.
- Nurture relationships with all family members.
- Be willing to talk about conflicts and negotiate with family members.
- Define yourself; develop your own family style.
- Share with family members the tasks and responsibilities

of family work—parenting, managing schedules, dealing with relationships and emotions, and housework.

Employer and community resources and strategies

For employees:

- Work part-time, share a job, and/or have flexible work hours.
- Do paid work in the home, if possible (although this creates other problems).

For employers:

- Provide adequate child and elder care.
- Provide cafeteria-style benefits and offer benefits to more employees.
- Provide flexible transfer and relocation policies.
- Listen to employee requests about dependent care, benefits, and flexibility in scheduling.

Summary

Think about what you want from life for you and your family. How does work fit into that? Is the work you do important for your sense of self, or is it important primarily for the money? Learn how work life affects family life, and how family life affects work life.

Talk with family and friends about how work and family conflict can increase stress, and about ways to deal with this stress. Establish a support group at work to share resources and ideas with coworkers. Share resources with your friends and relatives. Contact resources in your community including

Principles of conflict-related stress

Stress often results from conflict between work and family responsibilities. Research has found three principles underlying this conflict.

Principle #1: Work and family settings have a built-in potential for conflict. For example, you can't be in two places (e.g., home and work, your child's school and work) at the same time. Conflicts can include: expectations of society and employers, difficulty dealing with anger, less time for social activities, too little money, feeling overloaded by roles, and the time and energy it takes to raise children and work outside the home.

Principle #2: Work and family environments influence each other. It's impossible to be energetic and creative 24 hours a day. You may feel exhausted when you come home from work and have little energy for your family, feel exhausted when you go to work and have little energy for your job, or carry negative or positive feelings home from work or to work from home.

Principle #3: Stress is minimized when there is a connection between work and family settings. Being able to talk about work at home and about family at work can lessen tension between the two. For example, you may have conflicts at work that you unconsciously bring home. If your family knows about the conflicts, they are better prepared to be supportive.

schools, parent support groups, county Extension offices, mental health departments, Adult and Family Services, and other agencies.

As you find new strategies and resources to help you make choices and feel more control over your life, you likely will become more satisfied with your work and family situations.

Other resources

In addition to this publication, Oregon State University Extension offers a 1-hour program titled, *A Delicate Balance: Managing Stress Related to Family and Work*. The program helps participants understand how work and family affect them; discusses strategies for reducing

stress; explores participants' experiences to find concrete ways to reduce stress; and helps participants find ways to make choices that increase their satisfaction with their work and family situations.

If you would like this program in your county, call your local Extension office and ask for the home economics agent. Extension offices are listed under "County Government" in your telephone directory.

For further reading

Burns, M.D., Comeau, J.K., Jones, M.H., Melberg, V.M., & Nirenstein, C.R. (1982). *Balancing work and family*. St. Paul, MN: Vocational Educational Work and Family Institute.

Burns, M.D. (1993). *Balancing work and family: Holiday stress*. Minneapolis, MN: Family Information Services.

Duncan, S.F. (1990). *The balancing act*. Auburn University, AL: The Alabama Cooperative Extension Service.

OSU Extension publications

Communication Through Family Meetings: A Resource for Parents of Pre-teens and Adolescents, EC 1436, by Leslie D. Hall and Joe Angelelli (Corvallis, Oregon State University, 1994). 50¢

Communication Strategies for Adult Couples, FS 322, by Leslie D. Hall (Corvallis, Oregon State University, 1994). No charge.

Nontraditional Families, EC 1412, by Jan Hare and Lisbeth Gray (Corvallis, Oregon State University, 1992). 75¢

Shared Custody: Increasing Benefits and Reducing Strains, EC 1443, by Sue Doescher and Jan Hare (Corvallis, Oregon State University, 1994). 75¢

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