OPTUM®

Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

July 2016

Work/Life Balance

The Rush to Get It All Done

These days, many of us are caught in that stressful balancing act of juggling heavy workloads with demanding family and relationship responsibilities. In our rush to "get it all done" at home and work, our stress levels spike. In fact, one in four Americans describe themselves as "super stressed."[1]

Work/life imbalance cannot only make you stressed; it can literally make you sick. Stress can weaken our immune systems and make us susceptible to everything from colds and backaches to heart disease. New research shows that chronic stress can actually double our risk of having a heart attack.[2]

Work/life imbalance can also cause our productivity to plummet, leading us to become disengaged or "checked out" at work. That can lead to lower job satisfaction, increased absenteeism and poor performance at work, which can block the way for future advancement and success on the job.

That can also be expensive for business. A Gallup poll says 70 percent of American employees are either "not engaged" or "actively disengaged" in their work, which can cost companies $450 billion to $550 billion per year.[3]

Finding the Balance

Almost everyone is too busy these days. So how do you balance the demands of relationships, family, work, school, care giving and still find a little time for yourself? A good place to start is with your own expectations of yourself. For example, many of us have the expectation of being super parents, great workers and doing it all—with ease.

However, these seemingly innocent yet commonly high expectations can compound the problem. Expecting to do everything perfectly takes an enormous amount of energy and creates a lot of stress. The goal is to adjust our idea of perfection to what is realistically possible. Unrealistic expectations about what we can accomplish in one day can mean that we find ourselves falling far short of our idea of what is the perfect life.[4]

One parent says, "I am so over-scheduled at this point. In addition to my job, I've taken on a variety of projects. I'm producing a parents directory for my child's school, working on a newsletter for a hospital support group for parents with sick infants, setting up a recycling program in my apartment house, and taking a graduate course in English literature."[5]

This woman knows she should have said no to a few of these projects, especially since they came up at the same time. But she feels energized by the things she does because they are all things she enjoys and is committed to—a common theme among busy working parents.

Time Management for Working Parents

There's no doubt that to accomplish all the tasks that need doing in a day, you need to be well organized. But remember there is usually more than one way to do something, and some days finishing a task 80 percent of the way instead of 100 is good enough.

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The Value of Goofing Off

Making time for ourselves can seem like an expensive proposition: paying for vacations, pursuing hobbies and sports activities, and attending movies and concerts all cost money.

But not giving ourselves a break now and then can end up costing even more in terms of stress, work burn-out and even your health. Here are some ways to try to put more balance back into your life[7]:

- Balance work, home, and play
- Get support from family and friends
- Stay positive
- Take time to relax
- Get seven to nine hours of sleep each night (kids need more based on age)
- Get help or counseling if needed

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Developing a new approach toward time management can help reduce stress and make more effective use of your day. Knowing your own style and what works best for you and your family is also important. For example:

- If you are a morning person, make kids' lunches in the morning instead of the night before.
- Use lists—lots of them. Keep them in your house, on your phone, at work and even in the car.
- Set priorities and decide the one or two things—not 25!—you're going to do when you get home at night.
- Try to concentrate on what you're doing at the moment. When you're home with the kids, don't think about what you have to do at the office.
- Try not having a system: do laundry when you run out of clothes. Do just what you need to do to get your kids to school each day. [6]

Speaking of our kids, they are becoming as overscheduled as we are and following our examples (good or bad) in how to deal with stress and over-structured days. Teen stress and anxiety is on the rise. So remember to take time off for your own health and well-being and for your family. Relax and have some fun. It can be a great opportunity to reconnect with family and friends—and be a win-win situation for everyone.

How To Improve Your Work/Life Balance

Improve your well being by balancing the important parts of your life, especially at home and work, by trying some of these helpful techniques[8]:

At Home

- Unplug! Turn off smartphones, tablets, laptops, TVs, CDs, and DVDs. Enjoy the silence.
- Divide and conquer. Clearly distribute household chores and responsibilities.
- Don't over commit. If you're overscheduled with activities, learn to say, "No."
- Get support. Strong support systems can even improve your immune responses to illness.
- Call your SEAP. A valuable work benefit, provided at no additional cost.
- Stay active. Regular exercise reduces stress, depression and anxiety, and keeps you healthy.
- Get help if you need it. Seek help from a mental health professional.

At Work

- Set manageable goals each day. Be realistic about workloads and deadlines. Make a "to do" list, do important tasks first and delete unessential ones. Ask for help if needed.
- Be efficient with your time at work. Start by dividing large projects into smaller tasks. Complete each task before moving on to the next.
- Take five. Small breaks at work—or on any project—will help clear your head, and improve your ability to deal with stress and make good decisions.
- Communicate effectively. Be honest when you feel you're in a bind. Suggest practical alternatives. Make allowances for other opinions, and compromise.
- Give yourself a break. No one's perfect. Let yourself be human; just do the best you can.

And don't forget to keep a sense of humor about things—especially stressful ones—and the old adage, "Laughter is the best medicine."

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Click on WorkWell to find articles, news, resources, videos, webinars and self-help programs to help you manage your time, stress and find balance.

1 Mental health, work & life changes, stress, depression – liveandworkwell.com, https://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/library/showArticle.asp?aid=13829&tid=2&bid=36.

2 Ibid, www.liveandworkwell.com.

3 "More than job satisfaction," Kirsten Weir, American Psychological Association, http://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/12/job-satisfaction.aspx.

4 "Time Management For Working Parents," Ellen Galinsky. Work And Family Life Newsletter. Last Reviewed: July 2015.

5 Ibid, Galinsky.

6 Ibid, Galinsky.

7 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, http://www.cdc.gov/family/tips/index.htm.

8 "Work Life Balance," Mental Health America, http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/work-life-balance.

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