



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

THE BALANCING ACT: HOME LIFE AND WORK LIFE

Working families face many daily pressures. These pressures put an added stress on both the parents and the children. The challenge is to develop strategies for coping with the demands of home and work life.

Ask many working parents what the most difficult part of the balancing act is. You may be surprised by the answer. In fact, many families are equipped to handle the major crises of life, such as a serious illness, even though they may experience a great deal of pain as they cope with these major life events. But what can really wear and tear on the family unit are the day-to-day pressures and tasks that repeatedly draw on the family energy.

Day-to-day pressures are often felt when carrying out all of the necessary routine activities when a family prepares to leave home in the morning and on returning in the evening, from work and school.

THE MORNING BLITZ

For each individual family unit, there exists a time clock similar to a scoreboard at a major sports facility. However, on the family stopwatch, time is always running out. This is particularly true in the morning. Every member of the family operates under the rule that says, "We must be ready and out of here by a specific time each morning." Let's say 7:30 a.m. for the sake of argument! That means, by 7:30 a.m., all members must have worked their way through a checklist, something like this:

- ▲ Clean and well groomed
- ▲ Books, homework, show 'n tell materials ready
- ▲ Teeth brushed
- ▲ Dog walked
- ▲ Find the car keys
- ▲ Let's GO!

In the winter, add boots, mittens, snow suits, and time required to clear the snow off the car.

Many families have this stopwatch activity synchronized to an art form. And many families are even reasonably prepared for major morning disasters such as the discovery that Terry has the chicken pox! What can really send the scoreboard fluttering are the minor problems, although most morning mix-ups don't qualify as minor.

Picture this: A family member remembers at 7:20 a.m., that a special snack is needed to share with the entire kindergarten class. Another discovers a miniscule hole in the purple shirt, which just happens to be the central item in the whole outfit, thereby requiring a complete wardrobe change.

When these snags appear in the morning routine, the domino effect seems to kick in. The minutes speed by as the family tries to cope with the pressure of being late. Needless to say, it is often at these times that tempers flare, voices are raised, and the balancing act is clearly in jeopardy.

HOMEWARD BOUND

A very similar scenario can play itself out at the other end of the workday. That 5:00 - 6:00 p.m. time frame is often referred to as the arsenic hour! Imaging the following scene: Working parent(s) set off for the home front. The children are retrieved from the day care, and the family arrives home. Everyone is weary after a busy day. Add to this weariness, the fact that everyone is full of his or her particular news. All family members want to share their news with their parent(s) the moment they hit the front door! Needless to say, it is a time when patience may be lost and, once again, the balancing is precarious.

These day-to-day family unit pressures are often the most wearing on the family. The difficult part of this dilemma

rests in the fact that it is impossible to prevent these pressures from entering our lives. However, what is possible, is to develop strategies for minimizing the stress we feel in response to these situations. After all, we may not be able to prevent the event, but we are able to change our reaction. Keep in mind that no one solution is right for everyone. The following list of alternative ideas, is meant to act as a shopping list for working families, as they develop their own strategies for successful balancing.

THE 3 P'S: PLAN, PREPARE, AND PREVENT!

One suggestion is the 3 P's - Plan, Prepare, Prevent! There are many daily tasks that can be completed in advance of a deadline. You can often save valuable morning moments by taking a half an hour each evening to prepare lunches, plan your wardrobe, and prevent a morning rush. Look at each family member to see what he or she can do to help with the balancing act. Remember that, as children get older, they are able to handle the responsibility of preparing their own lunch.

Keep a central family calendar of each individual's commitments. At the beginning of each week, check with each family member to see if the calendar is up-to-date. This may help a family plan for special needs, such as the special snack for kindergarten.

TRANSITIONS

Making a smooth mental transition from work to home, and vice-versa, is important. Perhaps you could arrange for a quiet cup of coffee or juice, before arriving at work in the morning. If you drive to work, tune into a radio station that plays relaxing music. On the return journey home, take the time consciously to change gears and to prepare for the bustle of home. Think of some interesting or amusing stories to share with your family about your day. These transitional activities can help you keep the perspective of your busy day.

SHARE SESSIONS

Try to maintain a consistent family sharing time, whether it is over dinner or at any other suitable point in the evening. By having a set time for sharing news, family members will be able to hold off on the "front door bombardment" as they anticipate their own opportunity to share.

Incorporating some or all of these strategies may make the balancing act a little easier. However, there will

undoubtedly be times when patience will crumble, and tempers will flare.

It may be helpful for the entire family unit to talk about these emotional outbursts at an opportune time after they occur. Oftentimes, when tempers flare, comments are made that are not really intended or are received in a way that was not intended. Discussing the outbursts will allow for misunderstandings to be cleared up and help to mend any hurt feelings. Having a look at the events that led to the outburst, may help the family identify ways to avoid such incidents in the future.

A LAUGH A DAY...

Try to approach the daily balancing challenge with your sense of humour in the driver's seat. Try to be realistic about the expectations you place on yourself and each other. Leave some room to see the humour in some of the challenges you face. By maintaining a calm response, you may be surprised by the creative solutions that come to mind. The family that works together, and enjoys one another, maintains the balance!

The suggestions and ideas we've presented to you may be worth trying. A few of these may even alleviate some of the tension, or offer an excellent opportunity for things to run more smoothly in your household.

But let's face it. When dealing with family members, if someone could show you how to make your life easier, would you let them? When you speak with your EAP counsellor, he or she can make other suggestions (not listed here), or help you follow through with ones that are listed.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

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