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BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

Cooperative Extension Service
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THE JUGGLING ACT: BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

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Striving for perfect balance in every area of our lives seems to be the ideal for our society. We see balance as desirable in our physical health, our relationships, the use of our time, even our checkbook! We also desire perfect balance between two major arenas of life - - family and work.

Work can be paid or non-paid labor -- a job a person has for pay outside the home, tasks that you do for the family business which help keep the operation going, or even volunteer time a person donates to his/her community, church, or school.

Balancing work and family is both a female and a male issue. It's a women's issue primarily because women steadily are becoming more involved in the labor force outside the home. It's a men's issue because men increasingly are expected to be more actively involved in the home. For men, these expectations include doing household tasks as well as taking more responsibility for the care of children and/or aging parents.

Trying to balance work and family is much like trying to juggle many different colored and sized balls. We may feel that the challenges of balancing work and home are too great for us to manage. We never quite measure up. But, research concerning work and family provides strategies which can help us in this juggling act.

STRATEGY: ADAPT TO CHANGE

Adapting to change within the family is a necessary task. Families who manage the demands of home and work have learned to make adjustments. Responsibilities for household work need to be shared. Redistribution of household tasks is one of the greatest helps in off-setting stress for the working woman.

STRATEGY: COMMIT TO YOUR JOB

Commitment to the job is important if you are to see it as worth the possible sacrifice in other areas. Research concerning work and family suggests that the closer the match between husband and wife preferences and the actual situation, the better. In other words, if both partners agree that their jobs or careers are what they should be doing, the more likely it is they both will be satisfied. The outcome is less tension at home. For individuals, job fulfillment and satisfaction are important in managing stress.

STRATEGY: GET YOUR FAMILY'S SUPPORT

Women are more likely to be content if their spouses are supportive of their work outside the home. In some instances, there may be resentment by children and/or spouse. For example, children who feel deserted when mom decides to "go back to work" may sabotage attempts to balance work and home. Children who drag their feet in the morning or consistently forget to make their lunch, thus making everyone late, could be sabotaging the system.

Extended family support also is helpful to women working outside the home. Grandparents who outwardly or subtly criticize parents for mom "not being home with the children" undermine the sense of confidence that working parents need in order to manage. In the case of divorce, support or non-support from an ex-spouse also has an impact on the ability to maintain balance.

STRATEGY: ADJUST YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Adjusting expectations about the ideals of family life is another necessary strategy for balancing work and family. Some expectations will need to be compromised. Ask yourself, how often does the lawn really need to be mowed? Do I have to make "from scratch" cakes for birthdays? Do both parents need to attend every event for each child? Does the carpet need to be vacuumed every day? Can my children learn to do their own laundry? Do I have to attend every event

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?

Ask yourself what things really are necessary and which are optional in family, work, and leisure.

STRATEGY: ADJUST YOUR FEELINGS

Adjusting feelings and their intensity is used, primarily by women, to help balance work and family, research indicates. One type of adjustment, reframing, looks at the situation from a different perspective in order for it to be managed. For example, you may look at a snow day when you know there is a backlog of things to do at work, as an opportunity to spend time with your children, take a leisurely bubble bath, or clean out a closet. Adjusting feelings is an especially important tool for women, because they often internalize things that happen, saying such things as, "This always happens to me." Men, on the other hand, are more apt to explain a situation away by saying something like, "That's just the way things happen."

Other feeling-oriented strategies are meditation and relaxation. Time for oneself is usually the first thing to be sacrificed when trying to balance work and family, and yet, it is critical to health and well-being for both women and men.

~~STRATEGY: USE DIFFERENT STRATEGIES~~

Realize that different strategies will be needed at different points along your family's life cycle. Research clearly indicates that the age of children has a lot to do with how life is balanced. For example, arranging child care for infants and very young children can be a great stressor. Different strategies may be needed at this time in life than when children are more capable of taking on responsibilities for self-care.

THEY . . . WE . . . ME . .

Balancing work and family calls for more than distribution of time and tasks. It also has to do with recognizing that **there are three different domains in one's life - they (work), we (family), and me (leisure).** These need to be regulated and kept in healthy proportion. This does not mean they are always equal, rather, there should be an overall balance.

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Attitude and communication are common threads running through the challenges and strategies in balancing work and family. Attitude has to do with how we see our work and our relationship with our family. It also involves our own sense of self -- whether or not we are worthwhile, valuable people. The second thread is communication. We cannot expect to have things run smoothly if we build up walls between ourselves and people at home or work. We must practice talking openly about what we think and how we feel. And, we must learn to listen before we can understand how others think and feel.

Balancing work and family is an everyday challenge. Developing appropriate strategies will help us learn to juggle our responsibilities in productive and fulfilling ways.



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