



Balancing Work and Family

Change can be a scary thing.

In today's world many people are questioning where we are headed. Some are even wondering if the pressures of a modern working life leaves too little time for their family. And what happens if parents are unable to balance work with home? What values and beliefs will the next generation of children grow up with?

The perceived breakdown in the 'traditional' family unit as a result of issues such as changing work practices, increased career opportunities for women, and rising divorce rates, have left many wondering whether we should return to past 'values'.

However, since change is inevitable, we simply can't go back. Much of that change has been for the better, but embracing change doesn't mean giving up on the family or the ideal of gender equality. Rather it requires attention and effort to achieve an equal balance between today's worlds of work and family.

The first step toward achieving such a balance is to understand the importance these two worlds occupy in our lives and the way they impact on each other. You can't simply say one is more important than the other, nor can you arbitrarily denote them as masculine or feminine roles.

Although work most obviously functions to provide income, it also provides us with activity, challenge, companionship, social support and self-esteem. Likewise, our family life allows us to experience the important human need for intimacy, as well as the chance to relax, have fun, pursue non-work interests and feel in control of getting things done.

Our emotional well-being can be threatened when pressures from either of these two worlds become too strong. Strained marital relationships, conflict with children, financial worries, or performance difficulties at work can all impact on our day to day functioning.

Research has shown us that family conflict reflects itself in the workplace through increased work stress, low productivity, increased absenteeism, and industrial accidents. On the home front, work stress affects patterns of communication in the family with reduced role sharing, and an increase in disagreements. One partner's work stress has the power to increase the other partner's stress levels and can lead to increases in health risk behaviours such as smoking and drinking. Studies report about 40 per cent of men in fulltime employment find that work negatively affects their home life.

Of course, with other research showing that 42 per cent of marriages ending in divorce, 15 per cent of parents describing the experience of parenting as depressing, 12 per cent of families reporting high levels of discord, and 10 per cent of couples with children describing their relationship as fair or poor, life at home may not seem much better than work. The effects of relationship conflict produce negative psychological reactions in both men and women. Women may suffer depression, men risk alcohol abuse and both sexes can experience sexual dysfunction and health problems.

Behaviour problems in children are also a common result of relationship conflict and difficulties, with the lack of a consistent adequate financial income providing further stresses.

From all this we can see that the worlds of work and family have the power to seriously affect our basic quality of life and the quality of life of those around us. It becomes obvious that choosing a partner, deciding to have children, getting a job, and coping with work require due attention to their importance to our wellbeing and an ongoing effort to maintain a healthy balance.

So how do we go about achieving a balance between work and family?

Try rethinking priorities. Decide what is important and give priority to your children so that their own emotional development is not placed at risk. Help your partner to cope with the inevitable stresses of life. Talk with them about their problems and have a realistic expectation but be assertive and not allow their stress to add significantly to your own.

Develop effective wind down and relaxation activities that don't increase the stress of others. Regular exercise and healthy eating really does help you cope better. Try dealing with work stress through better work practices, such as more efficient management of time. This helps you get back a sense of control. Challenge unhelpful self-thoughts that can increase your stress.

A greater flexibility in working arrangements may be possible, depending on the nature of your work. If not, remember to negotiate with your partner for a sharing of family tasks that may ease the burden.

In the end, the challenge to balance work and family will be more than an individual effort. Beyond the family itself, if we as a society wish to embrace the positive aspects of change we need a major rethink about the importance of our families and their place within our working lives. It will require policies and strategies that pay more than lip service to the importance of the family unit, principles of gender equality, and greater flexibility in working arrangements for women.