Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The balancing act: home life and work life

Working families face many daily pressures that put added stress on both parents and children. Ask many working parents what the most difficult part of the balancing act is and you may be surprised by the answer. In fact, many families are equipped to handle major crises, such as a serious illnesses. But what can really put wear and tear on the family unit are the day-to-day pressures and tasks that repeatedly draw on the family's 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 when they return in the evening from work and school.

The morning blitz

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."

That means that by 7:30 a.m., for example, all members must have worked their way through a checklist that includes such things as cleaning and grooming, books, homework and show-and-tell materials, eating breakfast and walking the dog. In the winter add to that list boots, mittens, snowsuits, and time to shovel and clear the snow.

Many families have this synchronized to an art form, and many are even reasonably prepared for major disasters such as the discovery that someone has the chicken pox. What can really send things into a spin are the minor problems—for example, the discovery of a hole in a shirt, which just happens to be the central item of a whole outfit, thereby requiring a complete wardrobe change.

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

Homeward bound

A similar scenario can play out at the end of the day. That 5 to 6 p.m. time frame often referred to as "the arsenic hour!" Working parents set off for home, children are retrieved from day care and everyone is weary after a busy day. Add to this the fact that everyone is full of his or her particular news that they want to share, and it becomes a time when patience may be lost and, once again, the balancing is precarious.

Day-to-day family pressures are often the most wearing and it's usually impossible to prevent them. However, what is possible is to develop strategies for minimizing the stress we feel in response to these situations. We may not be able to prevent an event, but we can change our reaction to it. Keep in mind that there isn't one solution that 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 Ps: plan, prepare and prevent!

There are many daily tasks that can be completed in advance. You can often save valuable morning moments by taking a half hour each evening to prepare lunches, plan your wardrobe, and prevent a morning rush. Consider what each family member can do to help, then keep a family calendar of each individual's commitments.

Transition

Making a smooth mental transition from work to home, and vice-versa, is important. Perhaps you could arrange for a quiet coffee 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 to change gears and prepare for the bustle of home. Think of some interesting or amusing stories about the day to share. These transitional activities can help you keep the perspective of your busy day.

Share sessions

Try to maintain a consistent family sharing time, whether over dinner or at another suitable time, by having a set time for sharing news. This way, family members will be able to hold off on the "front door bombardment."

A laugh a day…

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

Talk it out

There will undoubtedly still be times when patience will crumble and tempers will flare. It may be helpful for the family to talk about these outbursts after they occur. Often when tempers flare, comments are made that are not really intended, or are received in a way that was not intended. Discussing the events will allow for misunderstandings to be cleared up, and help to mend 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.

The demands of home and work life can make the pressures of daily activities seem overwhelming, and can even result in serious conflict. Incorporating some or all of these strategies may make the balancing act a little easier.

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