
Balancing Work and Family

Work and family are both central to our way of life. Finding a balance between the two is an issue of importance to men, women and employers. Today, nearly 50 percent of families have two wage earners. Less than one-fifth of families are "traditional" breadwinner/homemaker families. Research suggests that when adults add children to their family, men and women tend to become more traditional in how they divide workloads. In other words, tasks become delegated by gender rather than by interest or ability. However, in order to successfully balance multiple roles, adults may need to become even less traditional than they were before becoming parents.



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Managing more numerous and complex work and family roles is a source of stress for many of us. Stress comes from two primary sources: role strain and spillover. Role strain occurs when the responsibilities of one role interfere with performing other roles. For example, a job that requires long hours or excessive travel may have a negative impact on a partnership or parenting role. Spillover is when the conditions and relationships in one area of our lives affect us in another area. For example, inflexible work hours, an overbearing supervisor, or a less-than-positive work environment can have a negative impact on your family life. Family concerns, such as an unsupportive partner, inequities in the division of housework and child care, significant health problems in family members, or changing childcare arrangements can have a negative impact on your work.

There are four processes we can work through, which can help us evaluate ourselves and our lives and make changes:

- Clarifying values.
- Setting realistic goals and expectations.
- Setting priorities and managing time.
- Letting go and understanding control.

Clarifying Values

Values guide our actions and are usually the result of our life experiences. Clarifying our values is one key to managing work and family demands. A value is defined as "a principle, standard, or quality considered worthwhile or desired." Most of us know some of our values, but sometimes important values remain unconscious or unknown. Often, we don't question or even acknowledge many of the values we hold until we assume new roles or experience conflict. The values we hold but are not aware of can often contribute to our feelings of stress; we can understand and ease this stress by becoming more aware of our values.

Some of our values may be in conflict with each other. For example, I may believe it's important to be at work early, and believe it's equally important not to leave the house until the kitchen is clean. Unexpected delays, or mornings where everything just takes a bit longer, could prove very stressful until I examine these values and think about how they interact. Modifying or prioritizing our values can be one way of easing role strain. Areas where we might have strong values may include housework, meal preparation and meal times, child care, car and house maintenance, the nature and amount of couple and family time, money, religion, education, entertainment, or politics.

Clarify and prioritize your values.

Setting Realistic Goals and Expectations

Goals are important in our lives and help us define how we use our time. Goals are shown in statements like, "I want to be store manager by the time I am 35," or, "I want to finish my college degree before I have children." Our values underlie our goals and give us the "push" to move toward achieving those goals. The values underlying these two goal statements might include a high regard for achievement and education.

Goals may be either concrete, like the two examples above, or relational, such as raising responsible children, building supportive friendships, or cultivating deeper understanding of ourselves. To ease role strain we can choose to put some goals on hold, let go of some, and modify others.

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Perceptions, attitudes and expectations are also important in understanding and addressing work-family issues. Expectations, perceptions and attitudes often take the form of assumptions about the way things ought to be done or the way we expect people to behave. These usually come from our values and may be harder to identify than our goals. Attitudes and expectations that don't fit with our needs today can also create conflict and stress. Many of us have high expectations about being everything to everybody, performing all of our roles well or being "perfect." Frequently, "supermen" or "superwomen" burn out or feel exhausted, irritable and angry. We can think about our attitudes and expectations and choose to change or modify those that no longer support us.

Set realistic goals and expectations.

Setting Priorities and Managing Time

Setting priorities is central to effective time management. Managing work and a household, finding time for family activities and friendships, and having time just for us is no easy task with multiple responsibilities and roles. When we account for all we need to do in a day, many adults have one to two hours, at most, for "leisure" time. But often these leisure hours are spent doing what we think needs to be done instead of what we want to do.

Even when we are efficient in using our time, we may not be effective—we "do things right" but we don't do the right things. Often, we don't plan and schedule activities that move us toward our goals, especially those goals that aren't concrete. Goals that focus on the development of people—our relational goals—may



be harder to have master activity plans for because they are day-to-day processes that are harder to identify and schedule.

Here is one way to manage time differently. First, we define our goals, and then we ask ourselves these questions:

- How do my expectations either foster or interfere with reaching my goals?
- Am I balancing my concrete or "material" goals with my relational or "people" goals?
- How will I know when I have reached this goal?
- What do I need to do today to reach this goal?

Manage your time by setting priorities that move you toward your goals.

Letting Go and Understanding Control

The last area to think about is what it means to be in control. Many times we feel we have more control if we do everything ourselves. However, this can keep us from reaching our real goals.

Think about delegating or dividing work to accomplish priority needs and wants. As we think about change in this area, or act differently, we may encounter unknown values or unexpected perceptions or expectations about how work should get done, and what work should get done. Even though we may want to reallocate home or work tasks, we find ourselves resistant, as if we stand to lose more than we gain. Understanding the emotional satisfaction we get from performing certain tasks, and the power attached to some responsibilities, are important aspects of effectively delegating or dividing tasks.

Stay in control by letting go.

Planning and communication are central to all change. Here are some other ideas to help balance work and family:

- Hold family meetings.
- Keep weekly or monthly schedules that schedule time for both concrete and relational goals.
- Be willing to revise plans when they don't work or changes need to be made.
- Understand what we can control and what we can't.
- Keep a sense of humor.
- Remember that effective management is not a static event but a continually evolving process.

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