

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

Finding Work-Life Balance

One of the biggest challenges for workers today involves finding an appropriate balance between work and family demands. The new reality is that both partners in a marriage are likely to be working outside the home, and, increasing numbers of parents are single parents, who also must work outside the home. The dual demands of work and family have forced many people to manage a wide range of responsibilities, including many they may have been raised to think others would shoulder. The competing demands work and family can place on your time and energy may be daunting, and may reduce your effectiveness both on and off the job.

While in the end it may be better to err on the side of family, it is impossible to support a family, or yourself, without a holding down a job. It is also reasonable for an employer to expect you to be an effective worker in spite of personal stresses. Each of us must find our own personal solution to balancing work and life demands.

Evaluating your goals and prioritizing your use of time

The first step in finding balance is to consider your situation and prioritize responsibilities based on your own circumstances, personal values, and life goals. Making an actual inventory of your responsibilities can help you to identify what is truly important. Follow these steps to create your own responsibility inventory:

- Make a list of the things that make demands on your time, and your current responsibilities.
- Prioritize each demand or responsibility according to how much your family's well being depends on meeting that demand or responsibility.

- Give a higher priority to things you must do to provide necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter for your family. For example, prioritize your work activities, inasmuch as they provide you with the means to shelter and feed yourself and your family.
- Give a medium priority to things you do to enhance your family's emotional and physical well being, such as helping parents with chores or helping your children to participate in intramural sports or music lessons. Keeping up with old friends or making time to work out in the gym also come under this category.
- Give a lower priority to all other involvements. For example, give a lower priority to volunteer activities or club involvements that aren't strictly necessary.

At the end of this ranking process you should have a list of demands and responsibilities sorted according to priority, with the highest priority demands and responsibilities listed first, and lower priority items further down the list.

There are several ways you can use your priority list to help you to manage avoidable stress in your life. First, your list can be used as a decision-making tool. When forced to choose between competing demands, choose to honor the demand that appears higher on the list. Give attention to priorities and let the less important things wait.

Your priority list can also be used as a planning guide. While there are some responsibilities that you have to handle yourself, consider alternative ways of addressing lower priority demands. Is a housekeeping or lawn service an option? Can family members share household duties? Can you delegate responsibilities?

Planning and Organization

Two important keys to stress management are planning and organization. Start by keeping a master calendar for the family. Post it in a location accessible to everyone and hold regular meetings to coordinate activities for the upcoming week or month. Keep the children's school and activity information in a specific place so that everything can be entered into the calendar. Work out who will do what about school events, after school activities, etc. Who's driving carpool on Wednesday? How will your daughter get home from the field trip? Put it all on the calendar. Do any of these activities overlap? Try to develop contingency plans in case of illness or other emergencies. Staying on top of things it will make it easier to get accommodations at work when that rare emergency occurs.

- Sort routine bills according to date. Mark bill due dates on the calendar so that checks can be written and mailed in plenty of time.
- Plan menus before heading to the grocery store. Make lists and organize the shopping trips. Involve everyone in the planning.
- Be sure to include time to do some of the things that will revitalize and inspire you.
- Schedule special times with your spouse and with each family member to do things you enjoy doing together.
- Plan times when each family member can pursue leisure activities. Include some form of daily exercise for your family members.
- Rethink how you use your leisure time at home. Designate one night a week as family night to read, listen to music, work on hobbies, play a game or do other things together that will bring everyone satisfaction over the long term.
- Simplify your involvement in non-essential activities. Volunteerism can be wonderful and it sets a great example, but you are not obligated to say yes to everything that is asked of you. It's okay to say no.

Whatever changes you decide to make, the object is to reduce your stress level by determining your priorities and adjusting how you attend to the demands on your time.

What Can an Individual Employee Do?

When you must seek an accommodation, research and determine how your employer accommodated similar requests in the past. Did they hire temporary workers? Did people who returned from family leave get their old jobs back?

Be realistic. Only ask for accommodations that are essential, and always offer potential benefits to the company when you make your case.

As an employee, you need to recognize that the goal of a business is to be successful. Any decisions about making flexible arrangements or otherwise accommodating work-life issues are based on public pressure (federal mandates and the perception of the company by potential stockholders and customers) and what advantages such changes might have for the company. Be advised of these facts before you make any requests or demands.

Educate yourself and work out your strategy before approaching the company.

If your accommodations are relatively routine and already covered by federal mandate, such as requesting maternity leave, there are probably policies already in force in your company. Read the personnel manual and talk to co-workers. If your need is not covered by an existing policy, you will have to make your case for special accommodations.

Ideally, you should adopt a "can-do" approach to finding a good solution that works well for you and for your employer. You should be willing to take the initiative:

- To generate various work-life balance solutions that could work for you.

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- To have the courage to propose such alternatives to your supervisor in spite of any fear that your supervisor might say "no" to your request.
- To look objectively at yourself and the ways in which you are valuable to the company.
- To take the time to prepare and present your case in a businesslike manner, and to be willing to negotiate the terms of such changes.
- To understand that you have the right to seek a better work-life fit for whatever reason provided it not only meets your needs but also the needs of the company or business.
- The thought and preparation necessary to make such an effort can be considerable, but so are the advantages when you gain the accommodations you desire.