

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

Balancing Your Work and Personal Life

Trying to fit everything into one day is a challenge for many of us. We are committed to our jobs, but have demanding personal commitments as well. Too often, one or the other suffers because time, energy or patience runs out.

Though we can't always change our circumstances, we can take steps to reduce the stress they generate and increase our level of balance, confidence and effectiveness.

You may find it helpful to think of achieving more balance in your life on two levels:

1. **The practical level.** Involves taking immediate steps to maintain a more composed day; and
2. **The big-picture level.** Helps you identify the areas of your life that can be enhanced.

For example, what causes you stress or frustration in your daily life? Is it getting the kids ready in the morning before getting yourself to work? Is it transportation difficulties? Is it choosing what to eat for dinner? Is it guilt? Worry? Sleeplessness?

And what part of your life do you feel could be more fulfilling? Have you always wanted to do or be something that you don't have time to even consider right now? Do you spend enough time with your family? On yourself? Learning? Traveling?

Take some time to consider these questions, then make two lists—one that captures your day-to-day issues and one for the larger life issues. Your lists may look something like this:

Day-to-day hotspots

- Rushing kids in morning
- Traffic jams, late for work
- Feeling guilty for yelling at kids in morning
- Dinner chaos, everyone's hungry, no food in house
- Argument with spouse—no time to talk
- Can't sleep, worried about work

Big picture wishlist

- More family time
- Improve intimacy with spouse
- Perform better at work
- Improve health

The next steps are to consider some solutions to your daily stressors and to create a plan to have your life reflect more of what matters to you. For example:

Rushing your kids in the morning. Enlist your child's participation in planning the night before. Allow them to have choices so that they feel involved in (and accountable for) getting to school ready, and on time. They can choose the clothes they want to wear and lay them out; gather what's to go in their backpack; check on the weather; plan the breakfast menu. These are real time-savers in the morning,

especially when emotions may be heightened.

Traffic jams, late for work. Go to bed earlier, set your alarm clock earlier and leave earlier so that traffic or other unexpected delays won't impact you as much. If you can't change your time schedule on the homefront, do it at work. Talk to your boss about flexible work hours: come in later and stay later. Or consider alternative transportation—can you car pool, ride a bike to work, walk, take the train?

Feeling guilty for yelling at the kids in the morning. They say parenting is the hardest job. What makes it more challenging is being hard on yourself when you don't react the way you know you should. Plan your responses to feeling frustrated and impatient and out of control with your children. (Count to 10, breathe deeply, walk away.) Decide what kind of a parent you want to be and get support to help that happen. Read books, get hooked up to informative and supportive websites, talk to friends. If you feel you need in-depth help, get support from a professional.

Dinner chaos, everyone's hungry, no food in the house. This is a common area of stress for families, and one with lots of solutions: pre-cook meals for fast re-heating; review recipes, plan menus and shop every weekend for the coming week; rotate cooking responsibilities; post nutritional guidelines on the fridge; consider grocery delivery services; serve healthy snacks (cheese/crackers) while preparing dinner to raise blood sugar levels and reduce physical, emotional responses to hunger.

Argument with spouse. Talk about ways you can avoid having your discussions escalate into fights and discuss the actions you can take to be supportive of each other. Set aside time to discuss household issues and come to decisions together. Identify hot-button areas that lead to anger and hurt, and find ways to resolve them. If required, tap into counselling for support, alone or together.

Can't sleep, worried about work. Write out your priorities for the next day before you leave work. Keep a notepad by your bed to jot down things you may remember to do—then forget about work when you're in bed.

Count sheep. Counting visualized objects or your own breaths can calm you to sleep. Count each inhalation and exhalation up to ten, then go back to one.

Big Picture Wishlist Considerations

Relaxed time with family. Are there changes I can make to my schedule to increase time with family? Do our activities promote relaxation, togetherness and our values? Have we fallen into a pattern of bickering or isolation from each other? Do I make family a priority? Are we learning new things about life and each other?

Intimacy with spouse. Are we making time to be together regularly? Have we found ways to communicate honestly? Are we generally defensive and angry with each other, or approachable and supportive? Are we both willing to take action to protect and grow our relationship?

Performing well at work. Am I focused on the job at hand? Do I feel comfortable speaking with my boss about schedules, family commitments? Do I have the resources I need at work to help me perform my job? Is my workload reasonable and my employer flexible? Do I use my time well? Do I seek support when personal issues interfere with my ability to function well at work?

Staying healthy. Do I have a good understanding of nutrition? Am I relying too much on processed foods when in a hurry? Can I combine good exercise with family relaxation? Do I have a positive outlook? Am I drinking lots of water? Do I try to achieve balance in all areas of my life—intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually?

Asking yourself the above questions is a good way to start paying attention to what matters to you and balancing your work and personal life. It's easy to get overwhelmed by things you'd like to change in your life, so don't feel you need to change everything all at once. The most important thing you can do
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is take one step at a time.

Your answers to these questions can lead you to another list of concrete steps that may include:

- Initiating a discussion
- Seeking out support and resources
- Changing the way you do things, or
- Starting a new project or process.

Making changes in life can be helpful, but it can also be challenging. Don't hesitate to get support through a professional to help with the process.