

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

Changing Gears: Making a Smooth Transition from Work to Home

Melanie arrives home from work about five minutes before her children make their way home from school. Sometimes she isn't able to focus on her conversations with the children because she drifts back to issues at work and replays events of the day. Her children often catch Melanie in the midst of her inattention, expressing their frustration by saying, "Mom, you're not listening!"

In another household, a similar scenario unfolds …

Bill finds that he's still thinking about work for at least two hours after he arrives home. When Bill is working on a major project with tight deadlines, he finds himself quietly running over details of the job, even while he is at the dinner table with his family. There are times when Bill's wife finds him distant, and his children find him grouchy for the first few hours after he comes home from work.

Perhaps without their knowing, Melanie and Bill are experiencing one of the most common, yet stressful, events of daily life—making the transition between the workplace and home. For many people, the demands of work and home are a world apart. They may call for a dramatic change in mental approach or a changing of gears, in order to deal effectively with the differing demands. For as long as people have been working outside the home, they have been making this transition. However, in the past few years, workplace and home life demands are increased and do constantly change, making this transition even more difficult.

At work, people are typically dealing with tremendous amounts of information on a daily basis. Technology such as cell phones, fax machines, and computers have enhanced our access to information. We are often required to act on information at the same speed that technology brings it to us. Consequently, at the end of a workday, it can be difficult to shift away from that day's information. Further, if the pace of the workday is very fast, with little time for reflection on events, trying to let go of daily work stress may be problematic for some people.

We may question the importance of making a smooth transition from work to home. The importance, however, lies in our ability to meet the demands and expectations that are placed on us by family and friends outside of the workplace. The way we manage transition can positively or negatively impact our relationships with family and friends. For instance, if Bill is having a difficult time of letting work stress go, and is unable to make a smooth transition to home, this can create or contribute to problems with his wife and children.

Where to Start

In the beginning, to improve the way in which we adjust from the work to the home environment, a good place to start is by looking at some of the assumptions that we may hold about this transition. A common assumption that people hold is that the difficulty they are experiencing in changing gears is only temporary. For instance, Bill may think that once he finishes the major project he's working on, he'll be able to relax and spend more time with his family. This may in fact be the case. However, if people are unable to free themselves of their work stress, day-in and day-out, long after the major project is finished, then this may be a sign that they are not making a smooth transition or changing gears effectively.

Another assumption that people may hold is that their family and friends will understand their situation, and will forgive them for their lack of attention to their needs. This may be so over a short period of time. If, however, family and friends are going to be continually subjected to the behaviors that often accompany difficulty in changing gears—impatience, aloofness, inattention, and irritability—they may begin to feel rejected. This can eventually place strain on these important relationships.

Once we identify that we are having difficulty separating work from home, we can look at and implement some strategies for changing gears more quickly, and effectively. Each of us will respond to, or benefit from, different techniques.

Things to Do at Work

There are some techniques that you can employ at work to assist in the transition. It is helpful to bring closure to each workday, by pulling together a list of all of the activities that are priorities for the next day. This will help free you from thinking about and planning the next day, while you are at home. If you haven't had a chance to do this list before leaving work, you may wish to create it at home. It's important to jot down these activities on paper, so that you will not play the same details over and over again in your mind. You can feel confident that you will remember the details because you've committed them to paper.

If you can, try to structure your day in order to deal with the most intense and demanding tasks very early, while leaving the more routine tasks to later that day. This may help you feel more comfortable in leaving at the end of the day, knowing that the critical demands have been attended to (dealing with the more routine activities afterwards is also less taxing on us mentally). This allows for the gradual changing of the gears.

It is probably better to stay at work to finish high priority tasks instead of taking them home with you. Taking work home on a regular basis, may confuse the boundaries between home and work for you and your family, and may make the transition even harder. If it is necessary to take work home, identify one place in your home for this task. Let your family know the location of your workspace, the length of time you will be focusing on work activities, and some guidelines around interruptions. It is also important to arrange some time where you will be interacting with your family.

On Your Way Home

An important technique that many of us can employ in making a smooth transition going from work to home, is to use our travel time to begin changing gears. Listening to music in your car or reading a book on the bus, can be a good distraction. Plan something fun to do tonight or sometime this week, so you can change your focus from work to home.

In the case of Melanie, she does not have private time when she arrives home. She could try to make good use of her commute to begin the transition, upon arrival, she must immediately attend to her children.

Once You're Home

Once you arrive home, there are some things that you can do to ease the transition. It can be helpful to do something physical to symbolize the change. Changing your work clothes into more relaxed and comfortable clothing is a good place to start. Having a bath or shower will allow some private time to shift your mental focus. If you require more time while at home to make this mental and emotional switch, discuss this with family and friends. Perhaps, spending time privately for the first 30 minutes after arriving home, may release the stress of the day. If family and friends know this up front, they will not mistake this downtime for disinterest in them.

You may find yourself at home worrying an unusual happening at work, such as an error or accident. It would help to put this experience into perspective, and look at it objectively. Try thinking about what more you can do about it at this time, what you have learned from the situation, and not to fixate on the
© 2026 LifeWorks (US) Ltd.

"if only" (something unchangeable). Try to imagine how significant this event will be in one week or month's time. In most cases, when we do this, we are able to put the event into perspective by looking at the larger picture, this allows us to let go of the worry.

Getting involved in activities that provide enjoyment and diversion can be an important method in freeing ourselves of work stress. Physical activity in its varied forms assists many people in the process of changing gears. Becoming a volunteer or taking up a hobby can also be rejuvenating. It's beneficial to choose something that is quite different from what you are involved with at work. You can try to get you family and friends involved with you.

Little by Little …

Changing gears in a way that allows for a smooth and effective work life to home life transition is not something that is likely to happen overnight.

The immediate benefit of being able to change gears is feeling more relaxed and in control. If the tips we gave help you to focus on the relationships and activities at hand, and you are able to divide up your thinking, then you have learned to apply each mindset to the appropriate environment.