



BALANCING WORK & FAMILY

Written By Debbie Neel, Ph.D., a local psychologist

We hear a lot about the family being as important as the career, but for many men, that is more an ideal than a reality. Achieving a proper balance of career and family is a difficult task. Our culture still tends to define "success" in terms of climbing the career ladder and by providing (abundantly) for the family. Yet, in viewing oneself as "the material provider," men may give more emotional energy to work than to family.

Frequently, men say that their work is taking over their lives. Workdays are longer (and more numerous) as more layoffs occur. It can be hard, if not impossible, to limit work hours. Doing so might jeopardize one's job or the family's financial stability. But the family unit suffers when there is little time and energy left to give.

Men may feel they should be doing more at home, but many corporations have little sympathy for dads who want to be more involved in their family life. Trying to get the right balance between career and family can feel like a battle between opposing forces. Negotiating this balance often becomes bargaining with the family because

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they are more accepting than employers.

Some men do regain a sense of equilibrium by seeking part-time employment or becoming consultants. Others are able to maintain home offices, but this can be a subtle "trap" to be even less available. It is not uncommon to see couples that are as confused by the man's presence at home as by his long absences. When working from home, is dad available to help with a school project or is it OK for him to miss dinner because of a conference call? Can he watch the kids while mom runs to the store?

There may be an accompanying challenge of supporting a partner's career or

being a single parent. This adds the juggling of childcare, keeping doctor appointments and attending school activities, cooking meals and cleaning up, mowing the grass, maintaining the car and more. Most people do not have the help of extended family nearby, and if they do, there is frequently added responsibility rather than less. Statistics show that more and more men are stepping in to care for aging parents.

Not only does the wife tend to feel resentful, but also the husband is feeling powerless and helpless. Men do not function well for long in situations feeling this way. Depression may set in, but go unrecognized because our society still sees depression as a woman's illness. As clinicians, we have become accustomed to seeing depressed women and expect to see the same symptom patterns in men. The perceived stigma of depression is still so strong that most never seek help. Therefore, many deeply depressed men go untreated and are even less available to their families.

While women are diagnosed mainly by paying attention to their feelings, men are

better diagnosed by paying attention to their behaviors. Men tend to vent their frustrations and anger by becoming irritable and moody. Rather than connect, men tend to withdraw from relationships.

Many men "mask" their depression. Feelings of depression are shoved out of the way by one mask of distracting behaviors or numbed by some preoccupation. Oddly enough, they may secondly mask it with the very thing that caused the depression, workaholicism. A third popular mask is avoidance of intimacy. A fourth common mask of male depression is sexual compulsions.

Depression places men at greater risk of other illnesses by keeping the stress response constantly activated, a state that can damage many organs, including the heart. Studies show that depression can shorten one's life. Depressed men are more than twice as likely as non-depressed men to die of any cause. If you suspect that you or a loved one has depression, consult a physician.

There are self-help strategies such as breaking large tasks into small ones, spending time with people in whom you can confide, replacing negative thinking with positive thinking and aerobic exercise. Accepting that life rarely has true balance allows us to begin to reasonably address the issue. Men's tendency is to not talk about a problem so that it is "not noticed" or because "nothing can be done." Think of depression or family tension as a warning sign letting us know that something is out of balance. There are things men are doing and can do more.

Reflect on times when the man has successfully connected with family and how it happened, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Do not discount those little things that show family members that they are more important than work. Create a list and commit to do them more. Verbalize to loved ones that you also are frustrated when you cannot participate, and then ask about the activity when you arrive home.

Call your partner during the workday, even if you must leave that romantic message on her voice mail. Schedule time with your partner, with the kids and also with the entire family. Put it on the calendar as you would any important meeting. Relationships do not just happen and neither does time together. Relationships can drift apart, but rarely do they drift together.

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WARNING SIGNS OF **IMBALANCE**

- Working late with little or no time to see the children or your partner
- Spending a lot of time unwinding
- Choosing to be at work instead of attending an important child's or partner's event
- Leaving it up to your partner to take time off work when the children are sick
- Knowing more about your workplace than about what is happening in the lives of your partner and children
- Giving too much time to the business; if self-employed, not having a clear boundary between when "on" the clock and when not

