



# Lives in balance

“Stress” isn’t a word you heard your parents or grandparents use very often. Until relatively recently, common wisdom was that everyone had a job to do at the office, in the plant or in the home and they did it without complaining. Today we worry about “quality family time” and “personal fulfillment on the job,” totally foreign concepts just a few generations ago. Are we more enlightened now, or just spoiled?

## Balancing work and home

Consider the way the modern workplace operates. Employees are expected to be more productive to help keep the companies they work for competitive. This means lots of multitasking and, often, working longer hours. Research by the Families and Work Institute (FWI) in New York found that rather than the standard 40-hour workweek, men average 48.2 hours and women (including part-time workers) average 41.4 hours.

These time demands spill out of the office, too. One-third

of us are in touch with work at least once a week outside of our regularly scheduled hours. As pressure in the workplace has grown, FWI has even found increasing numbers of employees who feel so overwhelmed by their current responsibilities that they are not interested in advancing to positions that would increase their workload.

Now add a few more factors into the “stress equation.” If you have children, they’re scheduled for activities ranging from T-ball to SAT prep courses. Even with teens that can drive themselves,

that still means coordinating additional schedules along with chauffeuring the younger kids. What's more, as a society we have perhaps greater expectations for leisure time than ever before, so don't forget scheduling your tee-times, weekend trips and when your favorite TV shows come on. Is it any wonder you're eating take-out more often and having trouble sleeping at night?

### Working woman vs. super-mom

The conflicting demands of work life and home life can be especially difficult for women with children, according to Lynne Knobloch-Fedders, PhD, a staff psychologist and coordinator of research at the Family Institute at Northwestern University. "Women have the pressure of living up to the standards of what they think the ideal working woman is. On the other hand, they're trying to be super-mom, too." As examples, she cites one of her clients, a working mother who stayed up all night to make cookies for the bake sale at her child's school the next day, and one of her own colleagues who feels like she should be with her kids when she's at work, but worries about her professional responsibilities when she's with her kids.

Dr. Knobloch-Fedders says, "People put a lot of pressure on themselves to be perfect at everything. Additionally, many women have the image of sacrificing and putting everyone else's needs ahead of their own. We have to understand how being happy and healthy involves balance between a good personal life and a well-developed professional life."

Rosalind Chait Barnett, PhD, agrees, but worries that many men and women believe you can't really have both. As executive director of the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University, her research has documented attitudes in society that still view women as natural caregivers (i.e., wives and mothers) and therefore not well-suited to the workplace.

Although it is ironic in a country where the workforce is actually made up of nearly equal levels of men and women, she believes it is important for people to be aware of additional research that clearly shows benefits that come from working. "It gives women improved psychological well-being, better physical health, higher self-esteem, better marital relationships, a sense of accomplishment and opportunities to learn new skills," she says.

### Bloom where you're planted

When discussing stress in the workplace, Dr. Barnett cautions, "No life is stress-free. There's a price for everything. You have to ask yourself: 'Am I getting offsetting rewards that make the stress worthwhile?'"

The answer to that question is the key to finding the crucial

balance between work and the rest of your life. Just ask Cynthia\*, a well-respected financial services professional with over 20 years experience who was having a career crisis. "I was unfulfilled, frustrated, bored and felt stuck," she says.

For help, she turned to a life and career coach—what Cynthia jokingly referred to as "having a professional nag." What she really got was someone who gave her a fresh perspective on not only her job, but her entire life.

"She helped me recognize the good things about my job—that the grass wouldn't necessarily be greener somewhere else and I needed to find ways to 'bloom where I was already planted,'" Cynthia says. Her coach also got her involved in activities she felt passionate about outside of work, which completely re-energized her.

"Before, I thought if I just stayed busy all the time I'd be happier, but my coach gave me assignments to make me take better care of myself—'home-work' to eat and sleep better, exercise and make time to relax," Cynthia remembers. "It helped create a better balance between work and my personal life."

### Prioritize

Debbie Brown, a career consultant and coach with D & B Consulting, says, "If people are satisfied with their

lives in general, they focus less on problems at work. A job won't always make you happy, so you have to put effort into living a full and complete life to help you handle your job better."

She says the simplest and most important step you can take is to make a list of your priorities. Then review it to see if you're actually devoting time to what's important to you. "For example, if you want to exercise more but don't think you have time," Brown says, "try watching TV 15 minutes less every day. In a year, that adds up to a significant amount of time to use for something that really matters to you."

Brown points out that flexibility can often be the key to improving your work situation. Is flextime a possibility (working outside the normal 9-5 timeframe or working four 10-hour days)? Can you work from home?

Dr. Knobloch-Fedders of Northwestern's Family Institute says that once you've paid your dues and proved yourself in a job, setting limits can be helpful—even if you're on the way out to pick up your kids and have to tell your boss that you'll take care of that last-minute request immediately when you get back. Admittedly that's easier said than done, but Dr. Knobloch-Fedders says, "Limits are only effective if you stick to them. It's something you have to reaffirm every single day." ■

*\*Name has been changed for privacy.*