

# Working Solutions

## Balancing Work and Family

**Work and family are both central to our way of life.** Finding a balance between the two is an issue of importance to men, women and employers. Today, nearly 50 percent of families have two wage earners. Less than one-fifth of families are “traditional” breadwinner/homemaker families. Research suggests that when adults add children to their family, men and women tend to become more traditional in how they divide workloads. In other words, tasks become delegated by gender rather than by interest or ability. However, in order to successfully balance multiple roles, adults may need to become even less traditional than they were before becoming parents.

Managing more numerous and complex work and family roles is a source of stress for many of us. Stress comes from two primary sources: **role strain** and **spillover**. Role strain occurs when the responsibilities of one role interfere with performing other roles. For example, a job that requires long hours or excessive travel may have a negative impact on a partnership or parenting role. Spillover is when the conditions and relationships in one area of our lives affect us in another area. For example, inflexible work hours, a demanding supervisor, or a less-than-positive work environment can have a negative impact on your family life. Family concerns, such as an unsupportive partner, inequities in the division of housework and child care, significant health problems in family members, or changing child care arrangements can have a negative impact on your work.

There are four processes we can work through, which can help us evaluate ourselves and our lives and make changes:

- Clarifying values
- Setting realistic goals and expectations
- Setting priorities and managing time
- Letting go and understanding control

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## Clarifying Values

Values guide our actions and are usually the result of our life experiences. Clarifying our values is one key to managing work and family demands. Areas where we might have strong values may include housework, meal times, child care, car and house maintenance, couple and family time, money, religion, and education. A value is defined as “a principle, standard, or quality considered worthwhile or desired.”

Often, we don't question or even acknowledge many of the values we hold until we assume new roles or experience conflict. Some of our values may be in conflict with each other. For example, I may believe it's important to be at work early, and believe it's equally important not to leave the house until the kitchen is clean. Unexpected delays, or mornings where everything just takes a bit longer, could prove very stressful until I examine these values and think about how they interact. Modifying or prioritizing our values can be one way of easing role strain.

## Setting Realistic Goals and Expectations

Goals are important in our lives and help us define how we use our time. Goals are shown in statements like, “I want to finish my college degree before I have children.” Our values underlie our goals and give us the “push” to move toward achieving those goals. The values underlying this goal statement might include a high regard for education. To ease role strain we can choose to put some goals on hold, let go of some, and modify others.

Perceptions, attitudes and expectations are also important in understanding and addressing work-family issues. These often take the form of assumptions about the way things ought to be done or the way we expect people to behave. Many of us have high expectations about being everything to everybody, performing all of our roles well or being “perfect.” Frequently, “supermen” or “superwomen” burn out or feel exhausted, irritable and angry. We can think about our attitudes and expectations and choose to change those that no longer support us.

## Setting Priorities and Managing Time

Setting priorities is central to effective time management. Managing work and a household, finding time for family activities and friendships, and having time just for us is no easy task with multiple responsibilities and roles. When we account for all we need to do in a day, many adults have one to two hours, at most, for “leisure” time. But often these leisure hours are spent doing what we think needs be to done instead of what we want to do.

Even when we are efficient in using our time, we may not be effective—we “do things right” but we don't do the right things. Often, we don't plan and schedule activities that move us toward our goals, especially those goals that aren't concrete. Goals that focus on the development of people—our relational goals—may be harder to have master activity plans for because they are day-to-day processes that are harder to identify and schedule.

## Letting Go and Understanding Control

The last area to think about is what it means to be in control. Many times we feel we have more control if we do everything ourselves. However, this can keep us from reaching our real goals. Think about delegating or dividing work to accomplish priority needs and wants. As we think about change in this area, we may encounter unknown values or unexpected expectations about how and what work should get done. We may find ourselves resistant to letting go. Understanding the emotional satisfaction we get from performing certain tasks, and the power attached to some responsibilities, are important aspects of effectively delegating or dividing tasks.

## Summary

To balance work and family remember to:

- Identify and clarify your values.
- Set realistic goals and expectations based on your values.
- Set priorities and manage time by scheduling activities that move you toward your goals.
- Understand what you can and can't control by delegating and letting go.

■ **Source:** Judith Graham, University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Article has been edited for this publication.