Balancing Work and Home Life

Do you ever feel like we are being asked to do more with less, to be more involved with our families, to be more engaged at work, to be better parents, colleagues, partners, carers, friends and participants in our communities? It's true each of these things add value to our lives, our sense of purpose and a sense of reward. But we also know how hard it is for most of us to achieve balance across all areas of our personal and work lives. We also know that the elusive work-life balance that we struggle to find, is of vital importance to our health and for the productivity of the organisations we work for.

Work stress arises when the demands of work exceed the resources we have in managing those demands. Work is usually going to have a level of stress associated with it and it is normal for this level of stress to fluctuate, but when the level of stress becomes persistent or difficult to manage, it can cause significant challenges for physical and mental health (Australian Psychological Society, 2015). As work stress increases, it often impacts on time available for leisure and other obligations, which can develop into other sources of increased strain and stress.

The way to achieve balance may be to plan, effectively time manage and set boundaries around what is achievable in a day, understanding also that some days do not always go to plan. It is important to go easy on yourself when your plans, strategies and methods go wrong. If we see all of our efforts as not trying hard enough then it is likely that there will be no positive change around this issue (Caproni, 1997).

In order to balance work and life try to:

- **Focus when you are at work.** When you are at work, make those moments count. Reduce the distractions so that the hours at work are not leading to talking or texting loved ones, daydreaming, internet searching (Facebook, eBay, Instagram etc.) because chances are you will end up working overtime.

Think about when you are at your most productive? First thing in the morning, after lunch, or just before you leave for the day? Notice patterns and be honest about what could be done better in the actual work hours of the day.

- **Switch off when you get home.** Take off your work clothes as soon as you get home - it helps to create an emotional and physical action to the end of the day.

- **Make home moments count as leisure.** Listen to music when cooking, chat to family about their day. If a stressful thought of work creeps in, be kind to yourself and allow yourself to make a plan so you can then focus on home again. If you are someone who can keep a list – write whatever it is that is worrying you down. Mentally say to yourself, "I am going to think about this tomorrow when I have completed my emails".

- **Expect the unexpected.** It's important to plan our day - think about what it is we are trying to achieve and how to get there. However, can you think about a day that went to plan exactly as you thought it would? Sometimes the most unplanned days are the funniest, most productive and rewarding.

- **Accept unpredictability and lack of control.** Adapting to unexpected challenges is a skill we can learn and may help keep our anxiety at a healthy level.

- **Negotiate.** If you can't do something, say so, and work with them to reprioritise or find another way. If it is something that you can either pass onto someone, apologise about your availability/demands or if it is out of your speciality – perhaps learn a way to say "I can't do that today".

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- **Set goals, plans and prioritise.** Prioritise on the most important factors and goals in your life. Make your goals and plans accordingly - be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) so you can feel that you are making the changes that you would like to see.

  A goal may be to get fit and/or do something for yourself. Therefore the steps could perhaps be firstly finding a gym that is close to work/home that you can go to 3 times a week for one hour at 6pm.

- **Have a structure in place that is flexible!** Look at ways to have your work done in a timely way. Perhaps you need to start earlier at work some days and later on others. Perhaps a meeting at work means you can't go to the gym until 6:30pm. Look at your diary and plan for these days and perhaps embrace the changing nature of the workplace and the people around you.

- **Practice good time management.** Set the actual time that each task takes and ensure that a task should be given the appropriate amount of time it deserves. If it is a long meeting that always takes 90 minutes, perhaps give yourself 2 hours get there, read the agenda or read over your presentation again. Or give yourself time to get back to your desk before the next meeting starts. If you are having a day where meetings are back to back, think about that at the start of your day. What are you realistically going to achieve today?

- **Skill up.** If there is a deficit in your skill base – ask for help! Attend training, speak to your manager, look into online courses, and speak to a trusted colleague. There are many people who have sat at work confused and unclear. Engage your professional and personal network to ease the stress and see how other people do things.

- **Take a holiday.** Five days is better than no days. Two days are better than none. A long weekend away from the phone, email and internet with loved ones may be the best tonic to a tired, depleted worker. If your time is particularly stretched, plan out the whole year and try to have a break every three months.

- **Make the most of the weekend.** Get out at least once every weekend and set at least one day aside for a total break from work.

- **Reward yourself.** This may be with a movie on the weekend, a game of sport, a social occasion, something to break up the week.

- **Stay healthy.** Eat, sleep and exercise well. Even in times of stress, upheaval and change.

- **Chill out!** Find some space in your life where time is not scheduled or planned.

It is important to note that in some cases, the demands, commitment and sometimes reward around work are more achievable than the home/personal life tasks. That may also mean that our motivation to achieve at work can then impact on our ability to fulfil home/personal tasks. This may start a cycle where home/personal activities lose priority and more time and energy is given to work. This can result in turbulent relationships as personal demands rise, increasing the stress at home. It quickly becomes clear that as the workplace becomes the place of less stress, the home can be seen as the more stressful component as a person struggles to juggle work life balance (Caproni, 1997).

References:

Australian Psychological Society, 2015 <https://www.psychology.org.au>

Caproni, P 1997, Journal of Applied Behaviour Science: Work/Life Balance, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 46-56