

Creating a work/life balance in hard times

The state of the economy has had a profound impact on how people balance their work and personal lives. Financial struggles have forced many people to increase the number of hours they spend at work and take on additional jobs to make ends meet. In some instances, folks have sought work in states other than where they primarily reside.

Such measures have drastically tipped the scales, creating an imbalance between work and life - often resulting in increased stress at home and at work, a rupture in the family unit, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and physical health compromises, such as poor eating habits, lack of exercise, and poor follow-up with medical providers.

So how does one find work-life balance when financial constraints force us to focus on work and put our home lives on the back burner? Even vacation planning can prove stressful. "If I take time off, I will not be paid." "How can I afford to take my family on vacation?" "With the bills piling up, it would be irresponsible to take a vacation now." Goodbye balance, hello rut.

When faced with work-life challenges, it is important to remember that while the scales may not be perfectly balanced, there are steps that can be taken to slowly decrease the imbalance over time. Studies show that small steps to increase work-life balance can have long-lasting positive effects on employees and their families.

As with most problems, the first step in creating change is recognizing that there is a prob-

lem. Sometimes we become so ingrained in routine and tacitly accept that "this is just how it is." We fail to see it as a problem that is affecting so many areas of our lives.

Once we have recognized work-life imbalance, the next step is to identify the ways in which it has impacted our lives and the ensuing result. For example, "I am working sixty hours per week and am exhausted all the time, therefore I don't spend enough quality time with my children." Or, "I travel for work and spend a lot of time alone in hotel rooms, which has led to isolation and depressed mood, so I find it difficult to engage with my family when I get home."

Next, identify how you would like to be spending your time. If spending time with family due to long work hours is an issue, try to set aside one or two evenings per week where the family eats dinner together and stick to it.

Make it a rule. If you would like to get more exercise, start small. Commit to finding thirty-minutes once a week to exercise and then slowly increase the number of days as you make the time.

Do your best to not become bogged down with the household "must do" list. The laundry will still be there in an hour. That dish can soak while you exercise. Remember, everyone gets the same 24-hours in which to fill their time. You get to decide, to the best of your ability, how those hours are spent. Once you have found ways to incorporate more personal time, the desire for it will begin to grow, and you may find yourself being

more flexible in order to have more enjoyable time off.

When work-life imbalance has led to serious interpersonal conflict, depression, anxiety, or substance abuse, it is time to seek professional for help. Most organizations provide Employee Assistance Program (EAP) benefits to employees and their families whereby they are entitled to several counseling sessions with a licensed professional at no cost to the employee.

Family Centers' WorkLife Solutions program provides small businesses in lower Fairfield County, CT and Westchester County, NY wrap-around EAP services to help employees cope with any personal issue that's affecting their performance in the workplace. In most cases, within just a few solution-focused sessions, work-life balance can begin to be restored, providing relief from stress and other symptoms.

Remember... Even though every day seems like a juggling act, work-life balance can be achieved. It may take a mean a that little life reorganization is in order, but you (and your family and boss) will be happy to took the time to do it!



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