Work/Life balance: for the good of your health

Most of us strive to do the best possible job we can at work. Our sense of accomplishment is tied into how well we perform and how much we contribute to our workplaces. But, sometimes, things get in the way. Like life.

These days, countless studies point to the need for balancing home and work life to reduce stress, and increase personal and professional satisfaction and effectiveness. One of the best ways to start balancing the demands on our time, talents and energy, is to make our own health and wellness a priority. Making personal health a motivating factor in our daily decisions makes it easier to choose positive, strengthening actions over those that are negative, unnecessary or destructive.

For example, even when faced with a morning rush-hour that includes feeding, dressing and transporting children, as well as yourself, to school and work, you can take action to ensure the morning follows a restful sleep, that breakfast is nutritionally sound, that you've taken at least ten minutes to stretch and breathe to clear your mind, and that you've enlisted your family's co-operation as much as possible in preparing clothes, keys, lunches and schedules.

Paying attention to the little things does make a difference. And planning for the little things makes all the difference in the world. The larger issues - like learning to say no, meeting deadlines and adjusting work or child care schedules - also take planning, as well as assertiveness, personal responsibility and clear communication.

Today's employers tend to be more sensitive than ever to employee stress levels. They are taking steps to help reduce stress and promote individual wellness because they know a healthy employee with a balanced life is a productive employee. Your EAP, for example, is an excellent tool provided by your employer to help you resolve whatever work/life challenges you're facing. Tapping into the resources and support available through your EAP and your community can help you and your family achieve better balance and have more time for the important things. Like life.

Blurring the Boundaries Between Work and Home: Watch for Red Flag Behaviour

Just as we can't keep our home life entirely separate from our work life, we can't detach our personal thoughts and emotions from our day-to-day dealings at the workplace. Even with the most professional outlook and demeanour, the amount of time we spend with co-workers on the job can create deep bonds of respect and affection. Sharing a common goal, celebrating hard-fought successes, overcoming challenges with others in our workplace can open the door to a range of feelings - and sometimes blur the boundaries between our work and personal lives. Learning to handle these situations can make the difference between a healthy bond and one that is disruptive.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- *Check your connections.* Become aware of the nature of your relationships at work. Are they based on mutual respect? Are any causing you concern or confusion? Are you experiencing conflict or negativity? Are you comfortable with the content of your in-person, telephone and e-mail communications? Could you be sharing too much personal information with your co-workers, or is someone sharing too much personal information with you? Have you enlisted support from your employer, your EAP or others to work out a challenging workplace relationship?
- *Check your messages*. How do you communicate at work? Are you sending signals to some co-workers that may be misunderstood or deemed inappropriate, unwelcome or aggressive? Do you relate differently with men than with women? Is friendliness being seen as flirtation? Are there excessive levels of competition between departments?
- *Check your schedule.* Have you built in time for yourself outside of work? Are you spending too much time at the workplace? Do you repeatedly cancel personal appointments for work-related ones? Are you bringing problems at home into the workplace (or vice versa)?

If any of these issues are causing you concern, remember: help is available when you need it. Contact your EAP for support to manage your personal and professional lives - before concerns turn into conflicts in either area.

Gaining Balance by Saying No, Setting Boundaries and Feeling Good About It

Balance means setting clear boundaries, and that usually requires assertive behaviour. Assertiveness is a skill and, like any skill, it can be learned and it must be practised. Assertiveness is about:

- Expressing your feelings (positive and negative)
- Communicating effectively
- Establishing your limits and boundaries (so that you don't feel constantly stretched)

When setting boundaries, it is often necessary to say 'no' to some tasks and people. To the non-assertive person, saying 'no' can feel uncomfortable, rude, and even aggressive or hostile. Non-assertive people tend to find it difficult to stand up for themselves. They may find it hard to ask for what they want, or they may never have learned how to express their preferences, needs, opinions and feelings tactfully or effectively.

Use the tips provided below to practise assertive communication skills in lots of different situations. Soon, you will be able to call upon these skills automatically, and it will become easier and more comfortable to set boundaries and achieve balance.

On the road to an assertive new you

Here are a dozen tips to get you started:

1. Learn to identify and voice your worries and concerns. It is the first step to acknowledging and expressing your feelings and preferences in a positive way.
2. Work on your self-esteem. Do things and be with people that make you feel good about yourself.
3. Let go of perfectionism. No one is always right. If - sometimes - you think you don't measure up, be gentle with yourself (and others). You are doing the best you can.
4. Learn to use "I feel" statements to express your thoughts and feelings, especially in situations of conflict. An "I feel" statement sounds like this: "I feel ." (state feelings) "when you (or a certain situation) ." (state facts). "I would like ." (state your requirements, needs, preferences).
5. Find healthy ways to express your negative emotions, such as requesting better service in a restaurant, letting people know when they've hurt your feelings, discussing your differing views on a book or a movie, or asking to have some time for yourself or privacy when you need it.
6. Accept compliments graciously: say 'thank you' rather than making excuses or downplaying your own success.
7. Ask 'why' as much as you can - not to be difficult or challenging, but instead to establish your own thoughtful response to the accepted norm. Try not to accept rules, policies or practices unquestioningly, without determining if they make sense to you or are in line with your own values.
8. Learn what your triggers are. We all have them: certain people, situations or things that 'set us off' and prevent us from behaving with assurance. Once you identify these people, places and things, you can find ways to deal with them.
9. Learn to begin, engage in and end conversations comfortably. If you are unsure of yourself in social situations, look up books and online resources on etiquette and personal development; or join a club or group like Toastmaster's where you can interact with others and practise social skills among people who share common interests. If you are extremely shy or anxious in social situations, consider contacting your EAP for some professional guidance on overcoming this common problem.
10. Learn 'active listening' skills and apply them. Focus on what others are saying; repeat what they say in your own words and ask questions to make sure you understand. Wait until the other person has finished speaking before speaking yourself.
11. When you do have something to say, speak up clearly and state your case with confidence. Learn to use your voice and be aware of your body language so that you appear calm and in control, but not threatening or aggressive.
12. Deal with minor irritations before your anger builds.