



Continuing with COVID-19: Cherishing the Work-Family Balance

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Since the beginning of 2020 COVID-19 has been transforming the world in ways that most of us had not expected before. For the first time in modern history three of our major social institutions, namely, work, school and family life are all happening in one physical place, that is, our homes. Even in the best of times a great many females in the work force experience balancing the demands of work and the demands of family as the most difficult task. Finding the correct work/life balance isn't necessarily the easiest thing in today's competitive world. More than thirty years ago, sociologist and University of California, Berkeley professor Arlie Hochschild prompted the world to look at what really happens in dual-career households, in her best-selling book "The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home".

Issues with Asian Women

Thanks to COVID-19 lockdowns and curfews, most of us may even be feeling a little more off-balanced and off-course than usual. Being thrown out of balance during a pandemic like this may just be enough to drive you insane, especially if you are an Asian woman who runs a family. Why especially "an Asian woman"? In close-knit Asian cultures, where so much dependence is put on family ties, things could get overwhelming for a woman who runs

the family. With schools and daycares shutting down, and without additional childcare support, being co-oped up with children while balancing office work from home, can easily turn into an 'extreme sport'. Attending kids' school meetings online and fitting in their potty breaks into work meetings while watching out for your husband and sometimes even your parents and in-laws simultaneously with all the housework, could get unbelievably chaotic, if things aren't synchronized as desired. Therefore, when the boundary between home and work starts to blur, it is important to reset the boundaries, in order to get the work done without feeling stressed, depressed and/or ultimately burned out. The pandemic may have further amplified the pre-existing gender gaps where much of the burden continues to be borne by women.

Extended Hours

In a period where digital connectivity is at an all-time high, businesses are enabled to adapt and respond to the havoc, created by the pandemic, mainly by switching over to the "work from home (WFH)" mode. This has also resulted in a hyper communication culture, where one is expected to be online and on-the-job pretty much around the clock. Work meetings pop out of nowhere with hardly any prior warnings but with expectations of instantaneous responses. This has giv-

en rise to habits such as falling asleep with the smart phone in one's hand with the ringer at maximum volume expecting to be woken up at any time. This has become the "new normal". Recent data depicts that workers in isolation are more likely to clock an additional 60 hours per month as a result of COVID-19. This whole situation, where you're constantly expected to respond instantaneously to work needs, can really put a damper on an individual's mental health even while they work in the comfort of their own homes.

Research shows that 70% of the workers have expressed that the work period during the pandemic has been the most stressful period of their career, even more stressful than 9/11 and the Great Recession. One of the reasons for that is the expectations of employers for their employees to be as fast as the automated technology they use. Nearly seventy percent (70%) of the front-line workers in the healthcare industry, taking care of the victims of the pandemic, are women. About eighty percent (80%) employed in Child and Social services, seventy percent (70%) in retail sales/cash counters, sixty percent (60%) in customer service are women in almost all the countries. The irony that these female workers have to face is that most of these jobs require them to be present at the work place, and working from home is not an option at all. On top of that the tasks they have

to perform on those jobs require them to interact with the public, expanding their risk of getting infected. That certainly increases the chances of their family members getting infected, increasing their guilt and the stress level exponentially.

Issues of Stress, Overwork, and Loss of Productivity

Even though the employers may be happy to see that the workers clock in more work hours during the pandemic, what they should also analyze is the loss of efficiency and productivity due to mental and psychological stressors created by being overworked. At the end of the day we work to live, and not the other way around, and if you're a woman shouldering that extra weight in the family, it is important to find the right balance between home and work to safeguard your own mental health and sanity. It's not the easiest thing to do, but one can certainly achieve that by consciously focusing on creative methods of time and stress management.

Pre-Planning

Planning ahead is something very important when it comes to reducing

work stress. Instead of being overwhelmed by the workload, try having small realistic goals, and work to the top from there onwards. The best way-out is to schedule your priorities, instead of prioritizing a schedule.

Building a routine can greatly help with day to day activities. It isn't practical to slip into a slick new routine instantly, but planning ahead can help with organizing tasks to a great extent. Scheduling tasks a few days earlier can help with defining boundaries between work and home-life to a great extent. If not you may end up popping in and out of work the entire day. Building up the discipline to stick to the plan is never easy in the beginning, but eventually, it becomes easier, and ultimately you will end up feeling like it was one of the best decisions you ever made.

Syncing your daily routine with your spouse's can make things easier. Dividing tasks such as housework, kids' school meetings, and helping them with their homework between each other can help halve the workload.

It is important to understand that you're in the middle of a lockdown. During a pandemic, it's normal to be unproductive sometimes. As mother

in the family are always expected to be the bonding-agent holding everything together, it's completely normal to feel like a failure but it is also important to remember that feelings aren't exactly facts. It is okay to be unproductive occasionally since we are only human. Try not to measure your worth by how productive you were on a particular day.

Physical Well-being

Staying cooped up at home with family and work leaves most women neglecting their physical wellbeing, which generally ends up resulting in depressions and reduced productivity. Most women who workout tend to leave for work after hitting the gym, but now as gyms are closed due to the pandemic, it is highly likely that your little routine has taken a hit and you stopped going to gym altogether after the lockdown. That doesn't mean that you can't work out. Yes, it sounds like a bit of a stretch with having to balance kids and work, but people can always find time for things that they really want to do. The more you believe that the physical well-being is essential, it is more likely that you will find the time for it. Exercises help maintain the flexibility and nimbleness of muscles and joints which



are especially important because we are all stuck in a period where we sit hunched like a lowercase c in front of our laptops, hands on the keyboard, tapping our fingers away into oblivion. Therefore incorporating a brief exercise routine, or allowing yourself some time outdoors (not in a crowded area) can greatly help with feeling good physically, which increases efficiency of day to day tasks. There are plenty of exercise routines available on the internet, and most of them do not even require equipment. It'd just a matter of willingness.

Digital Fatigue

During this period, from work to grocery shopping, everything is done online. Too much screen time can be detrimental to eye-health and mental-health. Therefore, it is important to set some time disconnected from the screen, and take some time to unwind, and relax. There are so many ways to relax. When you're one of the breadwinners stuck with juggling work and kids, finding the time to relax is the real problem. Well the time may exist, but most women aren't just used to relaxing. Try using a meal as a cutoff point. For example, put all technological devices aside, after let's say dinner, and maybe read a book, or in the very least just have a nap.

Another way to create a boundary between work and home life is physically disconnecting work from your home life. That way, distractions can be kept at a minimum level and you don't have to constantly worry about your children zooming past you while you're working on something important.

Family Bonding

Having to live at home 24/7 during the lockdown is bound to take a toll

on our emotions up to varying extents in each of us, simply due to the fact that exceptionally stressful circumstances are more likely to arise due to the fact that you are cooped up all day at home with your family. Everyone feels adverse emotions, especially during this period, but it's always our individual choice to pick how we react to them. Sometimes it is tempting to snap at your partner to release the pent-up negative emotions but instead, acknowledging how you feel and trying to understand why you feel that way could go a long way in helping you prevent taking out your anger out on someone who did not even deserve it. Instead of snapping at your partner, try being mindful of what you say, and focus on communicating how you feel in an effective and healthy way. Getting angry is inflicting punishment on yourself for the mistake of another person.

Talking to your spouse about your day can help you unburden yourself, and develop a sense of closeness with each other. Similarly, interacting with your children and sharing activities with them can help minimize stress and develop closer family ties.

Further, during this period, it could be great to utilize this period to strengthen relationships, especially with the children and your partner. Every household is different. If you have flexible working hours try activities such as taking lunch together as a family, or setting aside some time to play with the kids. It isn't exactly the grandest thing, but at the end of the day, all we remember when we look back are the small moments that matter.

Work and family do matter, a lot, but so does your social life. Humans are naturally social creatures. Have a set time to have a chat on the phone with your friends and catch up on what

you missed before the pandemic happened.

Silver Lining

As the research shows leadership positions in the corporate world are mostly held by men. There are many obstacles women face when they try to access leadership positions, such as deep-rooted social and cultural taboos, conscious or unconscious organizational barriers and inadequacy of women's social networking. Women are more likely to be placed in leadership positions that are risky or in organizations that are undergoing crisis. The society, stereotypically, believes that feminine qualities such as emotional sensitivity, morale building capability and collaborative leadership style will help female leaders in handling such adverse situations.

The silver lining, however, as acknowledged by the whole world, is that women's typical adjusting-style giving priority to meeting others' needs first is just what the world needs the most during this pandemic. Women leaders of countries such as: New Zealand, Taiwan, Germany, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Denmark have shown the rest of the world that they are much better than all the male leaders of the rest of the world in protecting their citizens against the deadly virus, and still keeping the economy going well. What better proof would a woman need to get herself motivated to face the challenges created by this pandemic head-on? Last but not least, we should remember that this too will pass. Not immediately, but it will. Until then, improvise, adapt and overcome.