



## Well@Work Podcast

### Episode 14: Integrating Work and Family

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMSHA. On this episode of the podcast, licensed marriage and family therapist, Alex Clark, discusses how to balance work and life demands. And now, Alex Clark.

Hello, I'm Alex Clark, a licensed marriage and family therapist and project coordinator at the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. That's just my job title. My tagline is I have three kids, two jobs, one lovely wife, and no time. In this Well@Work podcast, I'm going to talk with you about how to bring your work and life demands into harmony during a pandemic.

During the pandemic we have experienced relentless threats to our personal safety, our family safety, and our safety in the workplace. We've been asking questions like how can I work from home when it's so hard to concentrate? What if I bring the virus home with me? Will isolation and technology impact my children's development? How can I take care of others when I'm so worried about myself and those closest to me? In response to those questions let's briefly turn our attention to the idea of work-life balance. The balance metaphor suggests that a gain on one side could mean a loss to the other side, which is why some have suggested replacing the balance metaphor with one that allows integration in an evolving perspective.

For example, let's take a look at this through the lens of Logan, a healthcare staff member working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Logan's daily work includes caring for patients in isolation who are battling COVID-19. Logan's family life includes being available for others when he's exhausted, navigating his children's educational and social challenges, and connecting with his partner while stress runs rampant. Oftentimes he is overwhelmed and balance doesn't seem to be enough because Logan has little leeway to alter his responsibilities. Logan needs time and space to make sense of it all. Instead of trying to use limited resources to find some sort of balance, Logan can zoom out and focus on the big picture. Logan notices how stress at work is carried over into home and life and that this spillover effect also works in reverse. His positive experiences with family and friends insulate him against the difficulties he faces when returning to work.

So, now that Logan has recognized that integrating can be more effective than balancing, what can he do next? Here are some tips that may help Logan, and those of us like him. First, how we make sense of things matters. I'm reminded of the words of Viktor Frankl where he writes, "When we are no longer able to change the situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." We can make new meaning in response to adversity. This meaning focused style of coping can help us make sense of what is happening and let go of unhelpful goals to generate new ones. Here's an example of how that can happen for Logan. While reflecting on the refrain "I don't have enough time," Logan took a step back from the overwhelming stress, calmed himself, and reframed it like this: "My time is full." With those simple words, Logan's complex life became a little more accessible. He made just enough room to be able to ask himself, "What do I want my time to be full of?" Logan realized he wanted gratefulness, joy, and hope to be the predominant themes in his life instead of stress, anxiety, and worry. Your answers to that question may be different and that's okay too, but notice, Logan didn't change his circumstances, rather he found a new perspective within those same circumstances. This empowers Logan to respond



to the new meaning that's been generated, instead of reacting to the overwhelming stress imposed by external circumstances. Using this kind of reframing not only reduces stress and improves mood, it can also make the time spent at work, at home more productive, positive, and meaningful. This momentary sense of mastery over your world yields positive emotions, which provides a psychological timeout from the distress. We empower ourselves when we shift perspectives, even if we can't change our circumstances.

Next, let emotional contagion work for you instead of against you. Emotional contagion is the idea that moods and emotions pass from person to person most often occurring right at or slightly below our conscious awareness. We are able to simulate another's emotions and begin to feel those emotions in our own bodies. Excessive stress from work can cross over at home and negatively affect the well-being of those around us. Conversely, success at work helps us feel satisfied and puts us in a good mood, and that good mood helps us be a better parent, partner, and friend. So, how can we use emotional contagion to positively impact our work and life domains? We can start by acknowledging that high quality social connections are not just a luxury but a need that we all share. We are influenced by others, but we can also influence others ourselves. By making the decision to spread positivity, we are exerting a positive influence over our world and those around us. As Logan notices more positive things and starts to share them with others, he actively interrupts the "I am overwhelmed!" script, giving himself and others a welcome relief.

Lastly, remember that the small things matter. With the smallest investment in the right places, you can radically transform the quality of your work and your relationships in your life. When everything is integrated, one small step in one area can create momentum in many areas. Say yes to your children's request to play, accept a friend's invitation to connect, engage your partner in conversation, cross just one item off your to-do list. The small things matter. When we are mindful of the small things, we develop a habit of responding to work and life demands instead of reacting to all the stressors. Invest in small things of meaning making to fill your cup, so you can spill over and spread positivity. Be the person at work that transforms just another task into, "I get to do this today!" Lead the charge at work and home and respond to the challenge of deciding how your time will be filled. By doing so, you can slowly transform your family, your co-workers, your work environment, and yourself. Spread positivity, make meaning, the small things matter. For more ideas, check out our website in the video description and remember to stay well at work and well at home.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website, and of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.