



Well@Work Podcast Well in Life

Episode 1: Balancing Work and Caregiving Responsibilities

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by grant from SAMHSA. In this episode, Emily Smith discusses returning to work and gives tips for balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. And now, Emily Smith.

Hello, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. When the COVID-19 pandemic changed how and where we work, we all faced challenges. Some were able to transition easily to working from home, but others faced the extra challenges of balancing caregiver responsibilities and work. And so, they made the decision to reduce work hours or stop working while child care, schools, or support programs were closed. Now that COVID vaccines have reduced the impact of the virus and schools, daycares, and support programs are opened, caregivers are ready to get back to work. But there may be some lingering concerns, so I'll share some tips to support caregivers as they get ready to return to the workforce.

My friend Brian has a son with a developmental disability. Brian's son Dave is in his teens now and until pandemic shutdowns closed his school and support programs he had a pretty busy schedule. Virtual school wasn't a good fit for Dave, so Brian cut his hours at work to home school Dave. It quickly became difficult to balance work and caregiving, so Brian and his partner decided that Brian would stay home full time to help Dave and his two siblings with school. After nearly a year, school and support services reopened and after the summer school break, Brian was ready to get back to work. But before Brian returned to working full-time, he realized he had some concerns. He wondered - How will potential employers view my decision to withdraw from the workforce during COVID? What if I can't find another job? What if my child has trouble adapting to full-time in-person instruction? What if these new variants cause another shutdown?

Like Brian, you may have concerns about returning to work. Here are some tips to help you balance work and caregiving responsibilities.

Tip one: give yourself a break. If you're worried about some of the same issues that Brian is facing, that means you are learning from experience. If COVID taught us nothing else, it is that things can change at any time. Armed with what you have learned, you are likely wiser and more prepared for the uncertainty of life than you were a year and a half ago. View this as a strength, not a weakness.

Tip two: craft a plan to manage contingencies. There are no certainties, but we are all a lot smarter about what can happen now, and making a plan to account for temporary shutdowns or other COVID related issues will give you some peace of mind. Identify friends, neighbors, or family members who might help you out if a short-term child care coverage is needed. Check on day care centers that offer respite services and find out how to utilize these services when you have short notice. Identify supports for your child that can be accessed as needed to get them through the transition. If you have a partner, work out a strategy to share the responsibilities by taking turns maximizing each person's leave benefits.

Tip 3: share your plan. If an employer asks about how you plan to manage your job given the uncertainty of the ongoing situation, share that you have crafted a plan with multiple options that will allow you to flex to the situation. No plan is 100% guaranteed to work, but your diligence will send a strong signal that you are serious about your responsibilities at home and work.

Tip 4: seek support. Work was changed by the COVID-19 pandemic and you may need support to make your return to work after an absence easier. Someone who has made the transition back to work after parental leave or navigated the workplace after taking time to care for others can help you. Their experience can help you set professional expectations, navigate hybrids schedules, and help you recognize the skills you developed while navigating caregiving duties. These informal connections create powerful psychological capital and include workplace skills that can enhance your performance and benefit your co-workers. A supportive relationship can help both of you on challenging days.

Tip 5: learn strategies to fight feelings of being overwhelmed. We all reach our capacity and become overwhelmed, when that happens take a moment to ground yourself. Stand and stretch, really stretch. Or make time for a one-minute meditation: get into a comfortable position and close your eyes, concentrate on your breath, if thoughts race, acknowledge them and dismiss them. You can add an affirmation like "I can do this." If you find you struggle often with these feelings, make time to practice mindfulness regularly. You'll find a guide in one of our previous podcasts "Self-Compassion and Secondary Traumatic Stress," find a link to it in the podcast notes. If the feelings persist, talk to a trusted care provider no one should struggle alone.

Tip 6: be gentle with yourself. The transition back to work may take some time. Some days will be more challenging than others, something you learned about as a caregiver. Make time for self-care, eat healthfully, get sufficient sleep, make time for exercise, or schedule time to do something you enjoy, even if that's doing nothing. In addition to modeling healthy behaviors for your loved ones, you'll be better able to overcome the challenges and stresses of balancing work and caregiving. For more information on how to balance work and life, check out our website with more resources, programs, and tools.



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, home, and school.