Well@Work Podcast
Season 2, Episode 21:
Helping Women Stay Well@Work

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 SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith shares some strategies to regain a sense of control to reduce the impact of stress that comes from balancing work and home life.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith. Early in the COVID pandemic, we cheered on healthcare workers. We admired their seemingly selfless effort to continue working under the extreme stress of a rapidly spreading virus. What wasn't shown in the media was how many struggled to balance work and family, especially women who had added caregiving responsibilities as daycares closed, classes moved online, and contact with social networks was limited. As safe and effective ways to limit the spread of COVID have let us inch closer to life returning to normal, the burden of caregiving continues to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women, leading many to feel the impact of stress and burnout. In this podcast, I'll share some strategies to regain a sense of control to reduce the impact of the stress that comes from balancing work and home life.

Although COVID-19 has taken its toll on all of us, much of the emerging research indicates the challenges of addressing the needs of women in healthcare, who make up 77% of all US health care workers. Research indicates that women in health care have been impacted more than men, reporting higher rates of perceived stress, more persistent mental health symptoms, and higher rates of burnout. Of these women, more than 50% said that the stress associated with the pandemic affected their mental health and one in five characterized that impact as major. The result is that many women working in healthcare are facing the impact of stress at both home and work, putting them at increased risk of burnout.

Burnout has been a concern in the healthcare industry for decades. Once called an epidemic, burnout among healthcare workers has reached a crisis level. As research indicates that as many as 1 in 5 health care workers has considered leaving the field because of the stress associated with the pandemic. Excessive workloads, lack of control over organizational policies, and a leadership culture that promotes selflessness among health care workers all contribute to burnout; all seen throughout the COVID pandemic. Characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, workplace conditions are major contributing factors to burnout. Personal factors have also been found to moderate and increase risk of burnout. Find more information about burnout in the season 1 Well@Work podcast "Recognizing and Managing Burnout."

A friend, Grace, shared some of the challenges she has been facing recently. In addition to being a nurse at a local hospital, Grace is a caregiver for her aging parents. Until the COVID pandemic, her parents were very independent and had very active lives. When COVID restrictions limited their social interactions, Grace saw her parent's health decline

rapidly, especially her dad, who is hospitalized repeatedly. So she decided to move in with them to help. Often grace has been asked to pick up extra shifts, something that can be especially difficult while navigating caregiving. Take today as an example. This morning, Grace took her parents to a doctor's appointment, which resulted in her dad being admitted to the hospital. After he was admitted, she ran home to get things for her parents who'd be spending at least one night in the hospital. While she was dropping them off, she ran into her supervisor who asked her to come in earlier to cover for a colleague, leaving her very little time to get ready for the new start to her shift. During her very busy work day, Grace spent her breaks checking on her parents, a floor below. By the time her replacement came to relieve her, Grace was exhausted.

Maybe you feel a little like Grace. I'll share some strategies that may help all of the Graces of the world address these stressors.

Tip 1: set work boundaries. Use available features on email or your phone to reduce the hours you're available outside of your scheduled hours. Focus on one task at a time and prioritize tasks when possible to increase productivity while at work. Take your scheduled breaks. Use the time to meet your physical needs, drink water, make time for a healthy meal, stretch, or even take a short walk outside.

Tip 2: build and maintain a strong social network. Feeling isolated and lonely can increase mental health problems like depression and anxiety and increases stress. Our social connections are vital to maintaining mental health and well-being. Family time, phone calls with friends, and breaks with colleagues can all boost your mood. Make dates with friends and stick to them. Connect with colleagues, those casual water cooler conversations are just as important as meeting for coffee in the cafeteria on a break.

Tip 3: mindfulness can help. Gratitude practice, meditation, and morning affirmations are all ways to center and focus a busy mind. Walking meditation is one of my favorite mindfulness exercises. I park as far from the door at work as I can and I use the walk to be present, focusing on the experience of walking, to free myself from the noise of to-do lists and other urgent thoughts to quiet my mind as I begin or end my work day. There are other micro mindfulness practices that offer the same benefits. For those who wash their hands frequently, take that time to breathe, center, and reset your mind and body while washing your hands. Feel the warmth of the water on your skin, smell the scent of the soap, take some deep breaths while you wash the lather from your hands.

Tip 4: stay curious to stay engaged. Being busy doesn't mean you can't be bored at work and at home. We can get dragged into a repetitive pattern that pushes us towards inertia-like constant busyness without the fun challenges that make life interesting. At work, consider asking a colleague to train you on a new treatment method, attend professional development training, or learn a new skill. Feed your mind. At home, a periodic switch of who is responsible for which chore or altering your routine where possible can mix it up enough to feel like you aren't re-living Groundhog Day.

Tip 5: take a self-assessment. To see how you're being impacted by the stresses of the pandemic, take a brief assessment. On the Well@Work website you'll find several tools researchers use to assess for the impact of burnout, perceived stress, and other syndromes often associated with healthcare workplaces. Once you take a screener, you'll be directed to resources which can help alleviate symptoms. Find a link in the episode notes. If necessary, consult a mental health professional to help you manage your symptoms; many workplaces offer EAP to make that process easier. Even as we move towards the new phases of COVID, many healthcare workers are struggling to recover. Using the strategies I've shared with you can reduce the stress of managing work and home responsibilities and reduce the risk of burnout and help you to stay Well@Work.

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.