

THE WORK-LIFE BALANCING ACT - IT'S GETTING HARDER

Do you feel you have a good balance between work and life?

Hang around the water cooler in any workplace today and you'll notice one of two things. Either no one's there because no one has time to hang around anymore, or everyone is talking about the fact that they don't have time to be standing there in the first place.

Today, everyone's got too much to do and not enough time to do it.

The issue of time has bubbled to the top of the stress agenda today. A few years ago it was dealing with rapid change. But more recently it's the problem of what we're calling "time poverty" or "time famine".

The Conference Board of Canada issued a report in June 1999 with the arresting title, "Is Work-Life Balance Still an Issue for Canadians and Their Employers? YOU BET IT IS!"

The report stated that "almost half of all Canadians are experiencing a moderate to high level of stress today as a result of trying to balance their work and home lives; 10 years ago, only 27% felt this way." They also noted that "60 per cent agreed with the statement that they don't have enough time for themselves and about 54 per cent said that when they need more time, they cut back on their sleep. Stress results and health suffers."

In an unrelated study, people were asked which they would prefer: sex or a good night's sleep. The majority picked a good night's sleep. The '80's boom phenomenon of DINK's (double income, no kids) was replaced in the time-squeezed '90's by TINS (two incomes, no sex). When lack of time and energy undermine our sex lives, things are really out of kilter!

Guilt is another common theme adding to the problem. People feel guilty when they leave home to go to work. Then they feel guilty when they leave work to go home. And, for many folks, even taking the time to watch TV before doing the evening chores or read a novel on the weekend induces pangs of guilt.

How did we get ourselves into this tangle? More importantly, what can we do about it? First, we need to learn a new vocabulary relating to work-life balance. At the top of that list I'd put the word PERMISSION.

Most people blame the lack of leisure in their lives on not having enough time. But, there's another factor involved. I used to think the word "leisure" meant rest and relaxation until I looked it up in the dictionary and was surprised to find that it comes from the Latin root, "licere" (the same root as the word, "license") and it literally means "permission."

Anything you do out of freedom and choice is a leisure activity, even playing a game of squash. Leisure doesn't have to be sedentary. It just has to be something that you choose to do. Our shortage of leisure isn't just about time---it's about not allowing ourselves to make the time.

One of the best parts of my job is to give people permission to do things for themselves until they can give themselves permission.

One of my patients was working six days a week and spending the seventh day at home with his family. But he admitted that he missed playing golf. Why wasn't he playing golf? Well, he felt he should spend his only free day, Sunday, with his wife and children. While I respected his values, I noted that he could play a round of golf and still have 12 hours left to spend with his family. He felt uncomfortable with the idea. Finally I said to him, "I'd like to give you permission to play golf this Sunday and just see what happens. Tell your family that it's my idea. Let's just do it as an experiment." He agreed to give it a try.

At his next visit he told me the following story. He'd played golf and enjoyed himself immensely. He even thanked me for giving him permission. But he also got some interesting feedback from his family. They said he was more relaxed, in a better mood, and more involved with them than he had been on the other Sundays. They told him that he was usually pre-occupied, withdrawn, irritable, restless. So, not only did he get to play golf but his family benefited as well---because he was a different person when he had done something for himself. The following week, he gave himself permission to play. What he had seen as a zero-sum game (i.e. if he won, his family lost) turned out to be a win-win situation because he still spent the majority of the day with them but was in a better mood and frame of mind.

The key to this story was balance. He met his own needs as well as those of his family.

We all should do more of this. It's not "Me first" or "Me only", but "Me too". Do something for yourself every day (for at least an hour on weekdays and two hours on weekend days). And do it without guilt.

The goal is BALANCE. But the key is PERMISSION.

All material copyrighted, David B. Posen M.D.