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## Finding Balance

In this economy, work-life balance may feel more out of reach than ever. (When was the last time you had time to read a good book?) Many of us are working harder and longer than ever before. And as the holidays approach, we're feeling the pressure to shop, wrap, cook and clean - all while bringing our "A-game" at work.

Between work, family and friends, it's easy to feel pulled in many directions. This month's Member Matters provides helpful tips to find that elusive work-life balance.



## Staying Connected to Your Family

Most people agree that their relationships with their spouses and children are what make life satisfying and meaningful. But it's easy to let the demands of a job interfere with these important connections. How can you nurture your connections to your family when you're up to your elbows in reports and household chores? Here are some simple guidelines for strengthening the bonds between you and your family members:

### **SPEND TIME WITH YOUR SPOUSE**

In a two-parent family, your relationship with your spouse is the framework for the family structure. Intimacy is what makes this framework strong. Spend some quality time with your spouse on a daily basis. Even if you don't have time for romance, this is a good time to talk about feelings and share news of the day. If you have something difficult to talk about, approach your mate when you're both relaxed. Avoid bringing up challenging situations right when you or your spouse walk in the door after a hard day at work. Respect your spouse's need for personal time, as well as togetherness.

### **LEARN TO NURTURE YOUR CHILDREN**

Children derive their sense of self-esteem from their relationship with their parents. They depend on their parents to set limits for their behavior and to provide good role models for expressing their feelings and behaving in a responsible manner. Healthy communication builds self-esteem. A child who can depend on the consistent, loving attention of a parent feels cared for, important and safe. One of the great joys of parenting is discovering and nurturing your child's personality and passions. Plan time together to find out what makes your child happy. This will also give your child an opportunity to know you better. When you're together, make simple listening and talking a priority. Try to forget about goals-the point of togetherness is to discover and appreciate each other, not necessarily to create the perfect craft project or to skate around the block.

### **DO THINGS TOGETHER AS A FAMILY**

Make the most of family time. Schedule regular family meetings to assign chores and discuss family goals and problems. This is an excellent way to involve children in problem-solving, such as deciding how to spend a summer vacation, figuring out how to keep the living room neater or choosing a weekly dinner menu. Family fun and leisure activities also keep you connected. Take advantage of leisure time to get to know your children outside the normal time pressures of school and work schedules. Plan family vacations, weekend outings and other recreational activities that everyone can enjoy together. The fun of having a good time together or the thrill of a shared adventure will create family memories you can all enjoy for many years to come.



## Ways to Achieve Balance

Life can be a juggling act. Work, family and personal needs compete for your time and attention, but a sense of balance can help you create a rich and varied life. Here are some ways to help you achieve balance:

### AT HOME

- **Spend time with your children.**  
Strengthen your children's self-esteem and build a positive relationship that will last a lifetime by spending as much time with them as you can.
- **Make meal times special.**  
Eat dinner together as a family several times a week. Make the dinner table a place for family members to share news and excitement. Serve healthy meals that everyone enjoys.
- **Hold family meetings.**  
Use regular meetings to assign household chores and to discuss goals, problems and family events.
- **Maintain a calendar of family activities.**  
Use colorful markers to note all appointments, meetings and special family occasions. Post the calendar where everyone can use it.
- **Have fun with your family.**  
Plan fun family activities. Exercise together; go on bike rides, hikes or day trips to relaxing places. Join fundraising walks and fun runs.

### AT WORK

- **Plan, prioritize and organize your work life.**  
Make long and short range plans for individual projects. Prioritize each day's tasks, listing the most important jobs first. Set a deadline for each task so you can complete the project on time.
- **Take breaks.**  
Breaks help you concentrate. Get up and stretch, have a refreshing glass of water or take a short walk, if possible.
- **Use your lunch hour.**  
Write a letter, pick up some groceries or make personal phone calls. Schedule a doctor appointment, read a book or think of ways to improve your work-family balance while you rest.
- **Sharpen your communication skills.**  
You'll have fewer problems at work - and at home - if you can express yourself clearly and understand others. Talk with your supervisor if you're having any problems at work.

## LEISURE TIME

- **Cultivate personal interests.**  
Take time for gardening, golf or crafts activities. Sign up for art classes. Join a bowling league. Learn to play the guitar.
- **Build regular exercise into your routine.**  
Join a health center or explore other options for regular exercise. Put on the calendar the time you've committed to exercise. Make "exercise dates" with a friend to help build commitment and fun into your workout.
- **Take mini-vacations.**  
A day trip to the country or a recreational area can add variety and relaxation to your life at little or no cost.
- **Get involved in your community.**  
Coach your child's soccer team. Give a crafts demonstration for the local scouting group. Volunteer for a special project at your place of worship.
- **Use your Employee Assistance Program.**  
Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help you find childcare and refer you to social services, community resources, educational opportunities and seminars that can help you learn how to balance work and family demands.



## The Importance of Vacations

Here's a news flash: Vacations are good for you!

Everyone knows it's good to take time off and relax. But many American workers act as if it's news to them. They don't take all the time off they have coming to them.

A 2007 survey by the Hudson employment firm found that more than half of American workers don't take all of their earned vacation time. About 30 percent of those surveyed said they take less than half of the time they've earned for the year, and 20 percent said they take only a few days instead of the full week or two that they're due.

Employees who avoid rest and relaxation may be hurting themselves. A number of studies show leisure time – including vacation time from work – is good for your emotional and physical health, and for your work performance.

- The Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial for the Prevention of Coronary Heart Disease followed 12,000 men with high risk for coronary heart disease over nine years. The findings? The men who failed to take annual vacations were at 21 percent higher risk of death from all causes and were 32 percent more likely to die from heart attack.
- The Framingham Heart Study, which began in 1948, found that women who regularly skipped vacations (only indulging once every six years or less often) were almost eight

times more likely to develop coronary heart disease than women who averaged two vacations a year.

- Research by the Boston Consulting Group found that high-level professionals who were required to take time off were significantly more productive overall than those who spent more time working.

Of course, not everyone has a week or two of vacation time stored up, or the money for a cruise or resort vacation. How can you make your time off count?

- **Plan wisely.** Be thoughtful about what kind of vacation you and your family will most enjoy. If flying makes you anxious, plan a road trip instead. If your toddler screams when trapped in a car seat more than twenty minutes, choose a child-friendly base at a nearby destination.
- **Mind your budget.** A vacation you can't really afford will increase your stress, not decrease it. Check out state and national parks or rent a cabin by the lake. If money's really tight, play tourist in your own backyard. Plan a scenic hike one day and visit a local art museum the next.
- **Disconnect.** Working remotely is great, but it's not a vacation. If you know you'll be tempted to check your email five times a day, leave your phone and laptop at home.

The American workforce lags behind those of other industrialized nations when it comes to taking their allotted time off. Do yourself a favor. Take the time off you have coming to you and enjoy yourself. Then come back to work rested and ready to go!



## Family Fitness

For generations, the hours after school and on weekends were filled with bike rides, ball games and tag with kids in the neighborhood. But today, physical play must compete with television, video games and the Internet for our children's attention. This change in childhood activities is affecting our nation's health. According to the CDC:

- The prevalence of obesity among children aged 2-19 has increased from 7% in 1980 to 17% in 2010.
- Overweight and obesity increase the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, and osteoarthritis.
- Physical activity helps build bone and muscle mass, promotes psychological wellbeing and may help young people do better in school.

Parents can make a big difference, helping their kids develop more active lifestyles. Here are some ways to make physical activity a regular part of your family routine.

### JUST HAVE FUN

For adults, getting enough exercise is often a chore. "I have to go work out" doesn't sound like much fun, does it? Instead of nagging your children to exercise more, invite them to play with

you. Biking, skating, and playing in the park or your back yard will get your kids' hearts pumping and be loads of fun.

Criticism and lectures can ruin a good time fast. Children will ask for help when they want to know how to do something better, and they'll let you know just how much coaching they want. Focus on having fun and don't let your high expectations discourage your kids from joining you for Frisbee or softball after dinner.

### **EXERCISE TOGETHER - EARLY AND OFTEN!**

One of the best ways to foster good exercise habits is to make fun physical activity something your family does together, and the sooner you start the better! Hiking with the baby in a pack or pushing your toddler on a trike can lay the foundation for associating activity with fun and family.

Once your little one is mobile, try "follow the leader" around your neighborhood or at the local playground. You can incorporate running, hopping, skipping and more, the sillier the better. Just watch out - you might have trouble keeping up when it's your child's turn to lead!

As your kids grow and their schedules fill up with school and extracurricular activities, make a point of scheduling family time after work or school and on weekends. Plan regular hikes, games and active adventures, choosing things your children enjoy to keep their interest level high. Be prepared to switch gears mid-game, since many children like to bounce from one thing to another.

### **ENCOURAGE ACTIVE PLAY AND PLAN PUMPED UP PARTIES**

Invite your children's friends to join the fun! When you have kids over, give them bats and balls and send them outside to play. For a birthday or special weekend activity, take your children and their friends skating, swimming, bowling or hiking. Just don't forget the appropriate safety gear!

### **ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING**

Organized sports are a natural choice for introducing healthy exercise into your child's life, and being part of a team can be an enriching experience. But if you pressure your child to win or are critical of his or her play, you may take the fun right out of the game. So keep it positive.

Also, remember that your child won't necessarily take to your choice of sport or activity. Some kids love to be part of a team, some are more comfortable with individual sports (such as swimming, gymnastics or martial arts) and others don't like competitive sports at all. Non-competitive activities, like dancing and hiking, provide plenty of exercise, too.

Foster a love of physical activity by encouraging your children to try different things and discover what they like best.

Positively reinforce your child's physical activity, whether she's the star of her soccer team or just loves to dance the afternoon away in her bedroom. Making exercise a regular, fun part of your family routine will help you and your kids stay healthy while strengthening family ties.

*As your EAP, we at MHN are working to provide you with the information you need to achieve optimal health and wellness. You can call us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and as always, all calls are confidential.*

**Getting Started is Easy!**

**Call your EAP for more information**