

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

Balancing Work and Family Life While Sheltering in Place, by Barry J. Jacobs, Psy.D

It is a challenge for many of us under the best of conditions to balance our work and family responsibilities, including caring for children and aging parents. For those sheltering in place nowadays, it has never been harder. You may be in a teleconference for work only to be interrupted by a phone call from your parents, a knock on your door from your kids or the house doorbell. You may be home schooling your children only to be disturbed by urgent calls from your supervisor. When you commuted back and forth to a workplace, you could better separate time spent on work projects and family caregiving. Now work and family times are more scrambled together.

This greatly increases stress levels during an already frustrating national health crisis. It can also undermine the quality of your performances and relationships. Without some masterful juggling of your many obligations, you may feel like you're dropping the ball with both work and family caregiving and disappointing your bosses, loved ones and yourself.

Here are some strategies you can use to manage these different roles while you're stuck at home:

Lower your expectations: This is not the time to seek perfection. Though no one wants to let down colleagues or family members in any regard, accepting that we are living in extraordinary circumstances will make it easier to lower your usual standards. Trying your best—and knowing some balls will drop anyway—may be as good as it gets for now.

If possible, lower others' expectations: Many American workers live in fear nowadays of being furloughed. It is therefore a tough time to have a talk with your boss or supervisor about the challenges of balancing work and caregiving. But it is better to explain those situations and then set realistic expectations at which you can consistently succeed rather than fail at unrealistic ones. Hopefully, they will understand and respect the high priority you place on caring for your family at this time.

Become an efficient compartmentalizer: Unscrambling work and family times as much as possible takes planning, the cooperation of your spouse, and discipline. If possible, designate a room or even portion of a room that is your workspace and is off-limits to others. If your company offers flex time, use it to create a new schedule for yourself that allows you to work relatively undisturbed during times of the day and evening when family demands are typically lower. When working, wear work clothes (for example, a blouse or button-down or company insignia shirt); this will help put you in a work mind-set. When caregiving, change into more casual clothes and turn off your work phone. No sneaking a peak at email while with family members.

Your work and family lives will always overlap to a degree. But you can bring a little more order and satisfaction to your day.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or IAClark@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.