

Restoring Work-Expat Life Harmony

By: Robin Pascoe

Who doesn't know (or is married to) the guy who comes home exhausted after a marathon day or a business trip too tired to do much of anything? Like most men, he probably also doesn't want to talk about it. Of course, he has legitimate reasons. He wants to get away from his work.

But refusing to speak about it, brooding, or looking like hell, only alienates and worries his wife more. She may not be in top form either, if she's been left alone for days or weeks to cope with the children. And needless to say, this guy is not engaged with his children.

Like many women, this wife may insist and prod (as I've done with my own husband), forcing her partner to finally open up. So he shares his problems, and then, seeing the distressed look on her face, he responds (and rightly so) with "But you wanted to know how I felt!"

"Connecting emotionally may also feel strange and even frightening to a man who has been taught to associate manliness with being a fierce, solitary competitor," writes [author] Gail Sheehy. A man who doesn't want to share may work longer hours because it's easier than talking to his wife or bringing his problems home. The kids are upset because Mom, who can't exert control over anything except them, is driving everyone nuts. Everyone is miserable.

And according to [expatriate academic] Margaret Shaffer, the more committed an employee is to his work, the less time and energy he'll have available to spend with his family. And so the catch-22 grows, because the harder an employee is working, the more reliant he will become on family or on recreational or community time to recharge... Throwing money at the problem, a knee-jerk corporate solution, doesn't work either, because it's not money that's the source of the stress. (Although most men will tell you money is always the problem.)

An expat employee who finds himself in this position may feel his only choices are to leave an assignment prematurely, take early retirement, or leave his marriage. For those who do stick it out, with marital and family strife and unpleasantness at home, the stress of the situation can lead to serious physical and mental health issues. The company's bottom line is negatively affected by the employee's ineffectiveness on the job. The employee's personal well-being and the health of his marriage and relationship with his children hang in the balance. And he's dead tired from trying to juggle it all.

Many successful executives keep on going, according to Michael Kimmel's report in the Harvard Business Review, by putting their problems in boxes. But even the men he refers to, who compartmentalize this issue in order to label themselves as good fathers, good providers, and good men, all "reported stress and irritability; half had trouble sleeping; most had few close friends."

The road to burnout

All roads for the employee, regardless of where they begin, may eventually lead to burnout. And that's not good news for the family unit.

“Burnout is the gradual process by which a person—in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain—detaches from work and other meaningful relationships,” according to Mental Health Month, an Internet-based newsletter. “It can result in lowered productivity, cynicism and confusion. A person at this stage feels he is drained, exhausted and has nothing left to give.”

In our over-stimulated, demanding world, burnout is very real, and it’s not a condition to be shrugged off. “In addition to feeling anger, cynicism and helplessness, burned out managers—those who expend a great deal of effort without visible results—often suffer from physical symptoms such as headaches, chronic fatigue and an inability to shake colds,” writes Harry Levinson in his award-winning essay “When Executives Burn Out,” published in the Harvard Business Review on Work and Life Balance.

According to Levinson’s research, burnout manifests itself in various ways and to different degrees, but it appears to have highly identifiable characteristics: chronic fatigue due to sleeping problems; anger at those making demands; self-criticism for putting up with the demands; cynicism, negativity, and irritability; a sense of being besieged; and hair-trigger displays of emotion.

“When people who feel an intense need to achieve don’t reach their goals, they can become hostile to themselves and to others. They also tend to channel that hostility into more defined work tasks than before, limiting their efforts,” reports Levinson. “If at times like these they do not increase their involvement in family matters, they are likely to approach burnout.”

Unfortunately, becoming more engaged in family matters is not something that can be turned on and off like a light switch. Emotions are involved, too. “My husband’s biggest challenge with work-life balance, I think, is guilt,” wrote one woman, echoing the opinion of other respondents to my Internet survey. “He is very aware that he has uprooted all of us, so it better be worth it! That is a pressure that I think can interfere with day-to-day work and life.”

Factor in the threat of obsolescence facing the aging baby boomer worker; a lack of control over workload, schedule, and deadlines; the absence of feedback, which makes an employee feel unappreciated; petty conflicts among workers or between workers and management; and anxiety about job security, and you will find a burned-out man or woman. Worse, for many it becomes the norm, taking the family down with him.

And here’s the good news: that doesn’t need to happen.

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