

ScienceTalk

# Managing work and family under one roof

Openness to exploring mutually enriching aspects of these experiences may be key

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For The Straits Times

The coronavirus pandemic has abruptly thrust us into the world of remote working.

For many, it is the first time working from home. People find themselves having to keep up with the demands of work and family life all at once.

It has become the new normal to telecommute, while simultaneously finding time to home-school our children, caring for parents, preparing meals, shopping for groceries online, and maintaining bonds with friends and family over social media.

Coping with these competing responsibilities can seem daunting.

The resulting tensions and conflicts can leave people feeling stressed, worried and even helpless. Many are likely to react by choosing one over the other.

#### WORK OR FAMILY?

With the "either/or" approach, people choose to focus either on work or family.

However, compartmentalising work and family time is sometimes not feasible or realistic, especially for working parents.

For example, young children may interrupt online work calls because they simply do not know better.

Likewise, being electronically tied to work at home makes it difficult to disconnect from work during family time.

When this either/or strategy fails, as it often does, people are convinced that work and family hinder each other. They end up worrying about their children while at work, and feeling stressed over work while spending time with their family. These thoughts and emotions can be overwhelming.

An alternative is to choose both. This more inclusive view suggests that neither work nor family has to be chosen over the other.

Once someone accepts the reality that it is not feasible to completely remove competing work-family tensions, managing both work and family demands will appear less daunting.

A win-win situation is possible.

#### EMBRACING THE PARADOX MINDSET

Research suggests that mindset matters. Studies have shown that a paradox mindset, which embraces a "both/and" strategy to find comfort with contradictory demands, helps employees grapple with tensions that arise due to scarcity of resources.

Those who adopt a paradox mindset are more creative and better performers in the face of tension.

Resource scarcity, such as limited time and financial support, is a major contributing factor to the low birth rate in many countries.

When confronted with the tensions of limited resources associated with career and motherhood, women tend to opt for either/or solutions.

Some choose to quit their job to care for their children. Some of them choose to delay or give up parenthood to pursue their career.

In our research on working motherhood, we found that a paradox mindset motivates women to pursue both their career and motherhood aspirations through a deeper acceptance of the accompanying tensions.

Doing so frees them to appreciate how their work and family life can mutually add value to each other.

For example, work experiences can cultivate qualities such as creativity and rapport building to foster positive parenting styles, while mothering experiences can develop new life perspectives and interpersonal skills that benefit work.

By recognising such a synergy, women feel more comfortable with the unrelenting and competing demands of work and family, and become more empowered to engage in dealing with them.

#### APPRECIATE WORK-FAMILY TENSIONS

To better manage working, living, and playing under the same roof, working parents can harness a paradox mindset to transform challenges into opportunities. This means accepting and learning to live with the tensions associated with competing demands.

For example, parents can tell children more about the nature of their jobs, or even allow them to sit in on virtual meetings to see how colleagues communicate.

When work deadlines are tight and there is no time for housework, they can use the opportunity to have an open conversation with older children, and rope them in to do some chores.

Taking some time to supervise children's home-based learning or play a board game with them can also act as a temporary break from work which could boost efficiency or help develop new ideas for work.

Situations are not always ideal, but an openness to exploring the mutually enriching aspects of work and family experiences may be what it takes to help people adapt.

A mindset to embrace tension and discomfort can go a long way towards helping us weather the challenges of work and family responsibilities.

If there is a silver lining amid the upheavals of the pandemic, it is the chance to take a step back, and the realisation that work and family can be allies.



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