

Introduction: Barriers to and Possibilities in Balancing Family and Work

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One of the most dominant cultural stories in the United States today, particularly for women, is that balancing family and work is “impossible.” This story is laden with images of exhausted women, neglected children, and uninvolved fathers who are raised to hero status for missing an occasional work meeting for a family obligation. These images may reflect reality for some families who face multiple barriers to the successful balance of family and work, such as inflexible, unsupportive work environments structured as if every worker has a “wife” at home, lack of affordable and quality childcare, and inequality in their intimate relationships. In addition to these common barriers, all families face the challenge of balancing family and work in a culture of workaholicism, which is reflected by the fact that average work hours in the United States are higher than in any other industrialized country and in a culture with biases against maternal employment. These barriers are often heightened for those marginalized by gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Clearly, social change must occur on a variety of levels in order to shift from a story of “impossibility” to one of “possibilities” for all dual earners.

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However, this “impossible” story does not reflect all dual-earner families—many are able to balance family and work well. But because lives that reflect balance often are not highlighted in the media or in public or private conversations, we come to believe that the “possible” story is rare or does not exist. Spotlighting these “possible” stories can instill hope for dual-earner families and motivate us to creatively confront the barriers to work-life balance in our own lives and in the larger social context. A belief that something is “possible” is fundamental to the ability to request, fight for, and demand change at an individual, dyadic, and societal level. History is fraught with “impossible” stories gone “possible” once expectations change—stories, for example, of Rosa Parks moving to the front of the bus, women demanding the right to vote, men demonstrating their ability to express emotions and be involved fathers. These all became “possible” stories once expectations changed.

As the director of a family therapy training program, I have come to realize that one of my most important contributions to my students and clients has been to serve as an example of “possibility”—someone who successfully balances family and work. Over the years, I have been asked many times, “How do you do it?”—as if it were an oddity or impossibility that I could be a serious scholar and a playful mother. This repeated question led me to reflect on my life and recognize the factors that support me in successfully balancing family and work, such as my prioritization of fun and recreation; my complete love and affection for my children with whom I adore spending time; my intimate partnership and deep friendship with my wonderful husband who equally shares in all of life’s responsibilities and gifts; the meaning and pleasure I derive from my work; my supportive and flexible work environment with an on-site preschool; my ability to focus and get a lot of work done in a short time; my commitment to work to “time” and not “task”; and my ability to build teams of students to work with me while advancing their careers. Even our elementary school is just one mile from campus, making it convenient to volunteer weekly, meet the kids for lunch, or drive to field trips. I literally feel surrounded by structures and relationships that support balance. Yet, an additional factor that contributes to balance is my belief that successful balancing of work and family is “possible” and within my reach. Not everyone has the support that I enjoy, and, for all families, we must continue to lobby for serious structural, institutional, and societal change to correct this. Yet, without a belief that balance is “possible,” even with similar support systems to mine, families may live the “impossibility” story because disbelief (based on negative media images) has become a major barrier to balance.

The pressing nature of the question, “How do you do it?”—repeated by students, clients, and colleagues—required more than personal reflection. It motivated me and my colleague to conduct a two-year grant-funded study where we asked, “How do you do it?” of couples successfully balancing family and work. In addition to this study, I am excited to devote this special volume to the important topic of balancing family and work. As therapists we need to continue to dialogue about family and work issues with each other, with our clients, and at political levels in order to create change. The change that I hope we will see in the future will be a society filled with “possible” stories that are not unique outcomes, but rather routine for all families.