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Less Can Be More When Balancing Work and Parenting

By SUSAN PINKER

I am a professional and the mother of two teenagers. The 15-year-old is having psychological problems. I am taking her to psychotherapy sessions, but this means I must leave the office one afternoon a week. I feel exhausted trying to keep all the balls in the air, ensuring that I meet the requirements of my job while I help my child. I know that family should come first, but I do have a commitment to work, too.

How can I satisfy all the demands and not burn out in the process?

--Fully Extended

Dear Fully:

Once upon a time there was always someone at home to plug the gaps. Her unpaid job included schlepping kids to appointments and filling the fridge.

Today, 2,325,400 mothers of kids age 16 and younger work for pay, says Statistics Canada, but most still do their old jobs, too. It's the kind of double-duty that Neil French, the recently disgraced creative director of WPP Group PLC, one of the world's largest marketing companies, says is an impossible task.

"You can't be a great creative director and have a baby and keep spending time off every time your kids are ill. You can't do the job," he said at an advertising event. Oh, but you can do the job, both jobs.

In one small way, however, Neil French was right: Doing them both perfectly is a fairy tale.

Striving for perfection may be the ticket at work, but perfectionism and parenting adolescents don't mix. To be sure, the psychological pressure of a teenager with problems sounds a constant buzz.

But unless you feel you must personally do it all, the logistics may not be as overwhelming as they feel. If your daughter is 15, why assume that you must leave work to take her wherever she needs to go? Provided the therapist hasn't asked you to attend, show your daughter how to get to her therapy appointments on her own. A less-is-more approach may not erase the worry, but it will ease the time bind.

After all, you researched and set up this support for her and are paying for it, which is heroic enough. In most cases you don't need to shepherd her, too. Give her a cryptic reminder, such as, "Today it's Tuesday with Morrie. Do you remember how to get there?"

Then feel free to go to work and stay there. Clue your manager in to the situation in broad strokes, so you'll have support if you must leave.

While you're monitoring her progress from a distance, congratulate yourself for nurturing your adolescent and contributing to her overall health.

You recognized her need for assistance and helped her solve the problem about how to get it, which puts her among the 53 per cent of Canadian youth who report high levels of parental nurturing and monitoring, according to a report released last week by the Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI), which surveyed the well-being of 5,580 Canadian teenagers.

"The message is that youth who say they have strong ties with parents, school and their community have better health," says Elizabeth Gyorfi-Dyke, director of the Canadian Population Health Initiative of CIHI.

In your case that means listening to your adolescent's concerns, being engaged enough to monitor her comings and goings, making sure she's connected with outside activities and helping her problem-solve. For any working parent, that's plenty. Doing any more may be a fairy tale.

Dear Susan:

I was recently diagnosed with prostate cancer, and I am weighing whether to try to change my work responsibilities after treatment. There are parts of my job I don't enjoy any more. But I am a private person and don't want to talk about personal matters at work. Please advise.

--Strong and Silent

Dear Strong:

A generation ago, doctors kept cancer diagnoses from patients, ostensibly for their own good. Today, it's some patients who find its mention taboo. It is often no longer a death sentence, yet many want to keep it secret. The idea that one brings this bad luck upon oneself is nonsense. Still, what you say to whom is your business.

Privacy aside, this is a great time to take stock. At work, are you doing what you want to do? People who make radical changes in their lives after a cancer diagnosis tend to live longer, says Lea Baider, a psycho-oncologist at the Sharrett Institute of Oncology at the Hadassah University Hospital in Jerusalem who is one of the leading authorities on the psychological impact of cancer.

People who use their illness as a catalyst for change -- and not just in their careers - - respond to treatment better and have more promising outcomes, she wrote in an e-mail. The question is not what will make you live longer but assessing how this event might improve your life while it's shaking it up.

Author Jonathan Franzen wrote about the mysterious effects of traumatic events in a recent New Yorker article, documenting how his impending divorce and his mother's cancer mysteriously turned him into an avid bird-watcher.

Only then did he consider Phoebe Snetzinger, the mother of a childhood classmate who became "the most successful birder in the world" after she was given a diagnosis of malignant melanoma.

"Snetzinger decided to devote the remaining months of her life to really serious birding, and in the next two decades through repeated remissions and recurrences she saw more species than any other human being before or since," Mr. Franzen wrote.

What impressed me was that it took a stroke of bad luck to make Franzen and Snetzinger do what they always wanted to. It would be a shame if you missed the opportunity.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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