

WORK / LIFE BALANCE



How to keep work stress from damaging home relationships.

Early in her career, Betsy would travel about once every other month. On her return, she'd look forward to being met at the gate by her husband, Gary. Mind you, it's an hour drive from their house to the airport - over the Golden Gate Bridge, through the city of San Francisco, down the freeway to the airport. Gary had a flexible work schedule, and he didn't mind.

But after a while, they noticed a strange pattern. Betsy's plane would land; she and Gary would hug and kiss and head for home. But more often than not, by the time they got to the Golden Gate Bridge, they'd be squabbling. They'd missed each other, looked forward to getting back together. What was going on?

They got the answer from a lecture that Gary attended. Apparently, anthropologists have studied tribes in Africa, where the men go out weeks at a time hunting for food. When they return, they do not swagger directly into their village. Instead, the lecturer said, the hunters pitch a camp just outside the village. They stay there for a day or two, watching the women, children and old people come and go. Only when they feel in synch with the rhythm of daily life do they return to their homes.

Business travelers are not unlike those African hunters. For days at a time, we're cut loose from homey tasks - making the bed, grocery shopping, walking the dog, taking out the garbage. We focus our energies on meetings, presentations, phone calls. It's challenging and stimulating; it engages all of our wit and intelligence.

Meanwhile, our loved ones are just as focused on the tasks in front of them - everything it takes to keep a home and family going, as well as their own work. Their days, too, require all their wit and intelligence.

Two partners, each involved in activities that contribute to their joint well being. But we're operating at different speeds, in different environments, on different wavelengths. Is it any surprise that we clash when we get back together? Here's another metaphor for this phenomenon: a canal. Picture two bodies of water separated by a narrow strip of land. To transfer boats smoothly between them, you need a canal - a series of locks that gradually lift or lower a boat coming from Ocean A until it's at the same level as Sea B. People, like boats, need level waters.

"I Don't Want To Talk About It"

How far do you have to go, how long do you have to be away, to experience the stress of "uneveled waters?" Not long, and not far. Because the important "trip" happens in our minds.

Have you ever heard a loved one say, "How was your day, dear?" And have you ever responded, "I don't want to talk about it"?

Your body is at home, eating dinner, watching TV. But where is your mind? Are you going over and over the events of the day just past, or the demands of the next? In other words, is your thinking driving a wedge between you and the people close to you?

The more we are absorbed in and by our own thoughts without realizing it, the harder it is for us to stay connected to other people, to listen and interact. In effect, we move farther and farther into an isolation booth - like those used in classic quiz shows.

The genre was parodied to great effect by the Comedy Channel's "Win Ben Stein's Money." In the climax of each show, Ben Stein, himself, went head-to-head with a contestant to see which of them could correctly answer the most questions in 60 seconds. Ben was serious about wanting to win, but everything else about his program poked fun at the quiz show genre. The two opponents sat in separate booths; the one who would go second put on earphones so that he or she couldn't hear the questions. Since it was Ben's show, his isolation booth had a cushy armchair, an Oriental rug on the floor, an antique clock, and a fine painting. In the contestant's booth, the only seat was a backless barstool; the walls were patched, the clock broken; trash littered the floor.

Ben's booth was resplendent; his opponent's austere. Yet the degree of comfort was irrelevant, for each was equally isolated. Hearing only what was fed through their earphones, they lost their freedom to choose what they paid attention to.

The high price of loneliness

All of us are caught, to greater or lesser degrees, in our own isolation booths. At the extreme edge of dysfunction, we may call such mental isolation "catatonia." Sufferers of this form of schizophrenia sit immobile, apparently having lost their ability to speak, see, hear, maybe even feel. They are, literally, "lost in thought." It's as if they are trapped in a theater, alone in the dark, watching the flickering lights of a movie on screen. They've forgotten that they make the movie; they are the scriptwriter, set designer, director, film editor.

It's normal to get caught up in a well-produced movie. Unfortunately, when we think egocentrically, the price of admission may be painfully high. Through isolationist thinking, we create divisions; we put ourselves on one side and "them" on the other, define situations using a set of right/wrong assumptions, consider options as being either/or and then fight to the death to defend our "right answer."

Sadly, the desperately disconnected are sometimes moved to violence. We've seen the consequences in our schools and offices, not to mention actual war zones.

In business, disconnection almost always stops short of physical violence. But the toll is high, all the same. Office politics, back-stabbing, face-saving, posturing, blaming, "looking out for number one," CYA memos - these are just some of the time-honored results. Newer variations are behind today's headlines, including: pitching B2B exchanges and global fiber optic networks that are nothing but vaporware; risking employees' retirement funds in schemes to help earnings per share this quarter; creating convoluted special purpose entities to dazzle fund managers.

The root of all this evil is thinking run amok. But, of course, not thinking is not an option.

Try to sit for even one minute completely still, paying attention only to your breath. Notice how much of the time you are distracted by a thought, any kind of thought: happy, sad, judgment, observation, memory, fact, etc. That mental chatter goes on all day, and all night, too.

We think. That is what humans do every minute of every day. We consider, contemplate, compare, contrast, cogitate, conclude, categorize, conceptualize, analyze, summarize, theorize, intellectualize, rationalize, reason, reflect, ruminate, speculate, suppose, study. We ponder and puzzle, muse and mull over. We deliberate and debate, deduce and decide. We have random thoughts, idle thoughts, trains of thought, after thoughts and second thoughts. We think even when we sleep, sometimes shaping those thoughts into dreams.

However we use our intellect all day, that's how our thinking thrums along all night. If we run nonstop, multi-tasking from one problem to the next, we are doomed to keep thinking at breakneck speed even while we are sleeping. No wonder so many of us feel sleep-deprived, or toss and turn all night only to awaken almost as tired as when we went to bed. Thinking ourselves to exhaustion is pandemic.

Where there's thought, there's hope

But while we all think, we also all have freedom of thought. And that means that we can choose what thoughts we dwell upon.

So, first, be aware of your thinking. Build in a little time during the day to create just a little breathing room between you and your thoughts. Leave your desk and walk around the block, or just around the building. If you have three minutes between a phone call and a meeting, don't check your e-mail; just sit and breathe deeply. Read the comic pages of the newspaper; find something to laugh at.

And as you transition from the office to home, pay attention to the people and buildings you pass. Turn off the ignition and sit in your car for just a moment before you walk in the door. Bring your attention to the present.

Agree with your partner to "level the waters." After a trip, for example, Betsy now wheels her own suitcase through the airport and secures transportation to her front door. She gives Gary a quick kiss; pats the dog; changes her clothes; checks out the mail; pads around the house for an hour or so. Gary is there, within reach, calmly doing his thing. When the "waters" feel level, the two engage.

She's still putting miles on the relationship. But now there are fewer bumps in the road.

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