

Hope for Overwhelmed Fathers

No man can possibly know what life means, what the world means, what anything means, until he has a child and loves it. Then the whole universe changes and nothing will ever again seem exactly as it seemed before.

--Lafcadio Hearn

On this evening things certainly didn't seem to be like they were before. This evening had been difficult. As I was trying to get my kids to bed, my daughter was whining and crying about tomorrow's school clothes while my son flopped around on the floor without a care in the world.

It was well past their bed time and I was simultaneously: upset with myself for getting behind schedule; preoccupied with a project I was late on; angry with my kids for not cooperating; and worried that they'd have another crabby day from back-to-school stress and a lack of sleep.

I could feel the tension envelope my shoulders and jaw. My mind was moving at a dangerous rate.

Then the moment happened.

My four year old son looked up at me as innocently as humanly possible and said, "Dad, what do snails eat?"

Everything slowed down and relaxed. The drama of the moment disappeared. My worry and concern had been revealed as a hoax. All that seemed to matter now was getting my kids down to bed in a warm and caring manner.

After stumbling through a "snail diet" answer, and thanking my son for putting things in perspective for me, I marveled at how quickly my emotions could change. Unfortunately, this shift is not always very easy for fathers who are stressed at both work and home.

The challenge for many fathers is how to deal with the stress that accumulates while attempting to balance their busy lives. In his book, "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail" (1994), John Gottman found that men produced much higher heart rates and raised their blood pressure higher than women during emotional discussions with their wives. These higher rates also tended to stay higher for longer periods of

time.

This study and many others show that it's often difficult for men to handle the emotional intensity that occurs in modern family life. This is particularly difficult for men who are feeling stress from work both work and home.

The result of the sense of overwhelm that men feel can be any number of reactions, including: disengagement, the silent treatment, angry outbursts, or excessive attention to work. Of course, everyone loses when these reactions become commonplace. And the truth is that these reactions can be improved upon and eventually avoided.

Here are five ideas for men in dealing with overwhelm in today's busy world:

1. Raise your standards: Commit yourself to improving your own skills in dealing with overwhelm and don't blame others. Realize that it always starts with you. Better time management is a good place to start.
2. Take time outs when the tension gets strong. These will help give you some time to get perspective on the situation. This will also show your kids you're working on it. You can't expect your family to work on their "stuff" if you don't work on your own.
3. Plan ahead and train your kids. A lot of stressful situations can be avoided by being prepared. Get things ready the night before and be very consistent with routines. Train the kids for every scenario that might occur.
4. Raise the bar for yourself by having your wife or kids (or both) keep you accountable. Tell them to remind you if they see you getting overwhelmed and angry. Then do what's necessary for you to create a healthier response.
5. Stop and take stock of what your work and family schedule is right now. What can be cut out or what needs to be more efficient? What's causing the most stress for you and what are the specifics of changing it? How about spending more time at work so you're not thinking about work when you're home? What irrational thoughts are you holding onto?

Fathers are often known as the fixers of things in their household. While it may be challenging, dealing with the stress of balancing home and work life is a fixable problem.

But it will take tough choices and new ways of looking at things.

The kind of tough choices that benefit both you and your family.

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