



Work-Life Stressors (v.2)

MSU WorkLife Office

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TO LEADERSHIP

Overview

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused all of us to make a number of shifts and changes in our lives. One of the populations hardest hit has been parents. Although each parent has their own set of unique circumstances, these stories are representative of what the WorkLife Office has been hearing in consultations with faculty, staff and postdocs. Please note, identifying information has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the individual.

Parenting Concerns

Tenured track faculty member/mother: I cannot keep up the level of productivity that I had prior to Covid. I have children at home and that adds additional responsibilities to my plate with school and daycares closed. I am **having sleepless nights worrying about my evaluation** during this time, since I will be compared with colleagues who do not have the same responsibilities as I do. I **don't know how to make the right decision both for my family and my job** regarding my children returning to school and daycare. I have started seeing a counselor and that is a good outlet, but I **need more direction and support from my leadership**.

Pre-tenure track faculty member/mother: I am **exhausted**. I always knew that I would have to have **conversations with my child someday about being Black in America**. I did not know it would come so soon and on top of a pandemic. I am carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders while many of my colleagues, who are well intended, are asking me how they can help. It is hard enough to balance work, cleaning, cooking, my career, and take care of my children, but the **added pressure has me considering taking a leave**. It would be detrimental to my career. How can I approach my white chair and white dean about my situation? I feel the extra pressure of being Black and succeeding, proving that I am as capable as my colleagues and I am **beyond mentally exhausted**.

PhD, Academic Specialist/administrator/dad: I am being **pressured to come back** into the office to work. I have a teenage daughter who has accommodations at school for ADHD and

depression. She will be doing online school for at least a few months. I also have a family member who has underlying conditions who lives in my home. I would be putting them both at risk by coming back into the office. My work can be done from home, and has been since March. However, **it does not look good to my dean if I do not come into the office.** The extra pressure and stress of prioritizing my families' needs with my dean's needs is causing my **blood pressure to rise** and am feeling stressed out. They say they can't "make us" come in, but the pressure is there.

Support staff/mom: I feel **so much stress**. I am working hard. I am too exhausted to cook. I yell at my kids way too much, I am allowing way too much screen time and I have **bad mom guilt**. Add to the list horrible issues sleeping and bad eating and I feel like **I am a walking disaster**. I don't know how much longer I can keep up this pace before my work or my relationship with my family starts to suffer.

Faculty member/mom: I came home to find out my **spouse wants a divorce**. I need resources on where to start. We have children, my mom is recovering from Covid and I have **a lot of added responsibilities**. Now I find myself coming apart trying to navigate my elder parent's health, a divorce, moving, and figuring out what is best for my children, hiring a lawyer and that is all before I teach and write. I do not want all of my colleagues to know about the divorce, I am not ready to talk about it. **How can I do all of this at once?**

Support staff/mom: I am a single mom with two children and I am able to work flexible hours, however, this **does not allow me enough time to get everything done around the house nor sleep. I feel lost.**

Academic specialist/mom: The added pressure of all the Zoom meetings is putting me over the top. Now, I have the pressure of meeting with chairs to talk about reopening. I don't know if my kids are going to go back to school in the fall, and if campus is open, how will that work? My kids see me working hard and trying to be the best mom I can be, but **I do not think I am succeeding.**

In the last four months:

The WLO has provided ten times the number of consultations and resource referrals to faculty and staff who are going through a divorce.

Referrals for counseling have at least doubled.

There have been several requests for resources for people in an abusive relationship.

Grief resources have been provided at least double the amount as before Covid.

The family list serve and related inquiries have included an increased number of requests for legal resources and community resources for financial strain.

Often, faculty and staff have reported lifetime high levels of depression, anxiety and burnout.

Sandberg and Thomas (2020) said, "Before the coronavirus crisis hit in the U.S., many women already worked a "double shift," doing their jobs, then returning to a home where they were responsible for the majority of childcare and domestic work. Now, homeschooling kids and caring for sick or elderly relatives during the pandemic is creating a "double double shift." It's pushing women to the breaking point."

Supervisor/Leadership Concerns

I supervise an employee who is a single parent with more than two children at home. I want to reduce their workload, but I am afraid it will come back on me for being a bad supervisor.

What can I do to help my employees manage their work and home life?

I have to make hard decisions about furloughs and layoffs and I know many employees are parents and the only income earner. How do I handle the stress associated with this?

I will put my employee's well-being first. Will this come back to bite me? It may, but I do not see any other choice.

I see faculty members on my team who are overwhelmed. I am not sure how to approach them to help. Much of what they are going through is personal.

Thank you for considering the vast array of concerns that our faculty, staff and postdocs are experiencing during this worldwide pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of recommendations that may be able to assist with some of the concerns raised by parents. Although there is no recommendation to “fix” the issue, since there are not enough childcare resources to go around, nor enough financial resources for families to afford the additional care. Add to that the individual differences in each situation, and the anxiety tied to health concerns of some of the options presented.

- Follow the Decision Making Model
- Lead with compassion
- Provide flexible options for work schedules and locations
- Put employees first
- Make employees aware of the MSU Backup Dependent Care program
- Share Care.com resources with employees (free to search with MSU NetID)
- Revisit priorities set before the onset of Covid-19
- Move deadlines that can be moved
- Rethink performance reviews
- Remove low priority tasks from the to-do list
- Communicate using transparent communication
- Refer to the WorkLife Office for family, workplace, career or resource referral assistance
- Provide information on “quaranteaming”

“Employers (and supervisors) must work to relieve this stress. Organizations are under tremendous financial pressure during this economic downturn, but helping their teams avoid burnout and illness needs to be a priority. That is how they’ll get the best out of their employees amid all this disruption and retain those workers when the crisis is over.” (Sandberg and Thomas, 2020)

Sandberg, S., & Thomas, R. (2020, May 7). "Sheryl Sandberg: The coronavirus pandemic is creating a 'double double shift' for women. Employers must help." *Fortune*. Retrieved from: <https://fortune.com/2020/05/07/coronavirus-women-sheryl-sandberg-lean-in-employers-covid-19/>