

Coping with Bull Sessions and Burnout

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Dear Susan

Our workplace is teaching sessions on dialogue skills and having staff talk about things that might never have been discussed at regular staff meetings. Do you think having "dialogue sessions" at work is realistic? Do you think we should consider opening up dialogue about difficult issues such as grumpy co-workers or do you think this is idealistic and too "touchy feely."

Mum's the Word

Dear Mum:

It depends on who is leading these sessions and what the goals are. In the hands of a skilled counselor or psychologist who has clear objectives and experience with leading groups, a group format to teach dialogue skills can be an effective way to decrease conflict. But agenda-less meetings without a trained facilitator, where any subject is up for grabs can be dangerous. Under these conditions, the practice is not idealistic, it's unethical. These groups were popular in the 1960's and 70's, and weren't called bull-sessions for nothing.

Dear Susan,

I am a 44-yr-old female health care professional working in a private neuro-trauma rehabilitation firm. In addition to my clinical work, I manage my department, direct a program and teach a 1/2 course at a prominent university. My patients have complex injuries; I am often involved for years and spend much time traveling to their homes, schools and workplaces. It is intense and demanding. I have 3 children ages 5 to 10. I am relatively well paid, and my job allows me to set my own schedule, so I take them to school, handle all the school liaison, medical and various appointments, plan and organize all the activities, and do the bulk of the never ending scheduling, driving and shopping that three kids require.

My husband works long hours and travels, most recently for over a week, and often over weekends. We have significant financial responsibilities, both present and future. Neither of us has a company pension. He earns considerably more than I do, and by his choice, keeps our finances separate. We have cut back our help. As a result the house is a disaster and the laundry piles up.

Since I married I have always worked, even part-time during maternity leaves. I supported my husband through graduate school, edited his thesis, and twice when he was out of work, helped him write application letters, role-played interviews, was his "cheerleader" and provided countless functional suggestions.

Now I am at a point where I am burned out and my children are feeling the stress. I told my husband (in tears), that I want to quit my job, but it's as if the conversation never happened. He has not mentioned it since. I need to find some balance and pay the bills; my parents helping out is not an option. Other jobs in my field do not pay as well, but are less stressful. I realize this is a multi-faceted problem, but I am sure it is one your readers can relate to. I would be so grateful if you could point me in the right direction.

Stressed, Exhausted, and Alone

Dear Stressed:

You're darn right that your predicament is multi-faceted: marital, financial, occupational and societal forces have combined to exert extraordinary pressures. Mixed into this brew are your own professional values. Do you ever say no? I have nothing against multitasking, but outside the home, you're now doing four jobs: clinician, manager, program director and university teacher. Plus, you make house calls! I don't know how much you're earning, but with all these demands (and no pension), whatever you're getting is not enough.

Yet, even if it sounds and feels like work-related stress, one of the fundamental problems is at home. You are shouldering the financial responsibilities of a traditional 1950's breadwinner, yet enjoying none of the benefits, namely having someone to share the demands of raising three children. More important than spelling each other for driving, planning and shopping is offering emotional and financial support, especially when the chips are down. This is the real issue. You held the fort, providing emotional and material support when your husband was a student and again when he was unemployed. Now you need him. This is not a question of pay-back time. Some elasticity is necessary in a healthy partnership, and if you can't negotiate some give and take on your own, you need a professional outside your situation to guide you. A good marital therapist can help with two issues: how to express and respond meaningfully to calls for help (ultimatums and silence don't count), and how to discuss more equitable divisions of labour and income. To be equitable, a couple has to consider all the resources they contribute to the family, not just financial ones. Despite incredible gains in work and education for women (according to the 2001 census, female managers increased by 40% in five years; medical students are now more likely to be women) their domestic responsibilities have largely remained static. Women are now more than twice as likely as men to commit 30 hours or more a week to unpaid work at home, even as their overtime hours have doubled. It's no wonder that a recent Health Canada study on work-life conflict by Linda Duxbury and Chris Higgins points to reduced satisfaction, increased burnout, depression and stress-related illness.

The phenomenon is bigger than you, but you can still tweak your circumstances. Start with cutting yourself some slack at work so you can find time to get the domestic and marital help you need. Instead of quitting, bow out of at least one of those four responsibilities for now. Work on negotiating more balance long term, even if it means finding a different job. Most employers – and spouses -- are starting to realize that it's

better for a committed worker and partner to scale down his or her responsibilities than to fizzle out and disappear from the scene, just when they're needed most.

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