The 21st Century Challenge: Balancing Work, Children, and Aging Parents

David L. Blustein
Department of Counseling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology
Boston College
Balancing Work and Family

• Premises:
  – To love and work—hallmarks of mental health
  – Our work as psychologists involves caregiving and nurturance.
  – Life includes unexpected twists and turns
The Unexpected Turns:
An Abbreviated List

- Illness
- Relationship problems and divorce
- Aging parents
- Financial challenges
- Problems with children
- Work-related issues
The Sandwich Generation

• Elderly parents:
  – People are living longer than ever before
    • My parents retired when Jimmy Carter was still President and they are both, thankfully, alive.
    • Indeed, my experience of caring for my aging parents suggests that our society needs to develop new solutions to the aging crisis.
The Aging Crisis

• We are all living longer—the most rapidly growing population, generationally, in the US, are people in their 80s.

• Our society is not constructed for caregiving.
  – My father’s rapid transition from reasonably competent to senile….
  – Five days off from work and then back to the grind….
The Emergence of Adults

• Arnett’s emerging adulthood concept is quite prescient and is particularly evident in the Blustein household.

• Children in their 20s, particularly from well-educated and reasonably well-resourced families, are often engaged in extensive identity exploration.

• Our young adult children still need a lot from us, in terms of emotional support and financial support.
Challenges for Emerging Adults (and their parents)

- Greater choices often mean greater stress.
- Increased level of mobility evokes greater need for support.
- We all advocate for extensive training and education—college expenses often continue to graduate and professional schools.
The Middle-Aged Psychologist

- Recall Super’s stage of maintenance:
  - The main task in one’s mid life is to maintain one’s status and achievement.

- Work is salient and indeed a passion for many of us.

- How do we balance work and family?
The Middle-Aged Crunch

• **Dealing with simultaneous crises:**
  – What to do when you realize that your current situation is about as stressful as your most stressed-out clients…

• **Set Limits:**
  – You do not have to be parent of the year or adult child of the year…
  – Communicate your commitments to people so that they expect less
Preparing for the Middle-Aged Crunch

• Or, what I wish I knew...
  – Estate planning---major issue and of relevance to everyone, not just people with resources.
  – Parents’ social supports—recall that their friends and families are dying, often leaving adult children as the major social support system.
  – Learn about your parent’s medical conditions and their financial condition.
  – Shared losses: How do we support when we are also grieving?
Preparing for the Middle-Aged Crunch

– Be proactive with both kids and elderly parents.
  • It is our responsibility to make sure that we do what we can to ensure that our behavior (or lack thereof) is harmful to others.

– Reduce work commitments, particularly to those obligations that are not providing you with viable rewards.
Navigating the Twists and Turns

- Exploring the concept of balance:
  - Balance is an ongoing struggle to attain.
  - It shifts and turns as we navigate our family and work lives.

- Unpack the honor of being asked with the tasks of a new project or assignment
  - Once one is asked to serve on a Board, work on a grant proposal, take on a special new clinical case, one has to actually do the work.
  - One can experience the affirmation with a polite “no”
The Public Lure of Work

• In many ways, creating balance is difficult because often the rewards for work are more discernible than are the rewards for caregiving, especially for caring for very young children and very elderly family members.
Some Hard-Learned Lessons

- You cannot “phone in” parenting and caring for your elderly parents—it takes time and it takes emotional energy.

- Kids grow up very fast—there will always be time for a new project, new clients, and new initiatives when your kids are older.
Some Hard-Learned Lessons

• Use the complementary system of survival thoughtfully:
  – When one aspect of life is becoming hard, seek out solace from other aspects.
  – Consider life as a multiple regression equation with well-being as the dependent variable; when things are not going well with one domain, you will need more of another predictor (domain) to have a sufficiently viable “life model”
Self-care is Critical

- Life stressors will come up, often unexpectedly. You can prepare by…
  - Ensuring that you have a viable support system in place.
  - Building in stress relief into your daily life (exercise, meditation, journaling)
  - Build up your resilience—use some of the tools we convey to our clients (reframing; affect regulation; mindfulness)
  - Use humor
Make Lemonade out of Lemons

• A life crisis can facilitate a major spurt in your work.
  – My book project…
• Dealing with needy elderly parents and needy children may suggest the utility of fostering greater intergenerational connections.
• Teach your kids lessons about caregiving as a lifelong aspect of life.
• Your skills in empathy and limit setting will improve…