Sandra is on her way home from the jail, and it’s been an especially tough day. Her husband and young child will be waiting for her when she arrives. After being at work, where she was telling offenders what to do, she knows she needs to switch gears—to be warm and relaxed. She needs to keep work stress from spilling over too much into her home life.

Spillover:
What is it?
Personal harmony is often upset when stress from work spills over into “after-work hours.” It also works the other way with stress related to personal life spilling into work hours. When that happens, mental and physical health, work performance, and personal relationships may suffer.

Negative spillover can happen when there is conflict between work and personal life expectations or when there is just too much to do.

When It Doesn’t Go So Well
People experiencing negative spillover are often less satisfied at work, have higher absentee rates and lower productivity. Negative spillover into personal activities can result in withdrawal or behaviors that are less loving and sensitive.

Health problems like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and a weakened immune system may increase as a result of negative spillover. Tiredness and fatigue are common due to sleep disturbances resulting from this spillover.

Differences . . .
Workers who work part-time and have more flexibility at work seem to have less negative spillover from home to work. Both men and women experience spillover. The one difference is that mothers struggle more with negative spillover from home to work when children in the home are under 12 years of age. When children enter the teen years, fathers and mothers experience similar negative spillover.

The good news is, that even though the link is not as strong, positive work and family experiences also spill over. Good personal relationships can help people withstand stress at work. People who have positive experiences at work tend to feel better at home.
Setting Boundaries

Creating good boundaries is an effective way to balance work and personal life. A good start is to identify clear priorities and make decisions based on those. When employed people list family as their highest priority, they tend to experience lower levels of work-life stress. Rather than negatively impacting their jobs, prioritizing personal lives can help reduce feelings of stress.

These tips can help set boundaries:

- Identify what is most important to you. What are your values? Use your values to set limits for what you will agree to do.

- Give high priority to personal activities, with time for leisure and time to enjoy family.

- Learn to separate work and personal life so you can concentrate on work at work and be fully at home when at home as much as possible.

- Focus on what you are doing. You will get more done in less time, leaving more time for your personal life and reducing the hours you must work.

- Learn how to clearly communicate so you can set limits and negotiate for them at work and at home.

- Have fun. Stay positive and use your sense of humor so you can laugh at life.

Transitioning into a different place...

Sandra had a tough day at work. What can she do to shift gears, to change hats—from officer to wife and mom?

First, Sandra has to be aware of the need to shift or transition. Once she recognizes this she can be intentional in moving from one world to the other.

Venting Eases Pressure

Sandra can build some healthy “venting” into her routine. Our daily stressors can blow us up like a balloon. We all know what happens to balloons that have too much air in them. Venting activities are ways to let the air out.

Venting is personal. One method doesn’t fit all. For some it is highly physical—an activity that involves pounding, punching, or running. For others it may be quieter—a time for meditating, reading, writing or praying. And, you don’t have to use just one kind. It’s good to have a “list” from which to choose. Some days may call for punching (a bag) while other days you feel more like reading or weeding the garden.

Venting should be

• Controlled
• Planned and regular
• Fitted to you as an individual

Building a Buffer Zone

Each day, but especially when things are crazy at work, Sharon needs to intentionally exit out of her work world and enter into her personal world. We can think of the time and place to do this as Sharon’s personal “buffer zone.” If she had an especially stressful day at work, the buffer zone can help her recover. But, even if the day wasn’t especially stressful, she needs this transition time to get ready for her personal life as a spouse, parent, softball player, coach, and friend.
If Sandra has a 15 minute drive to and from work she could use her commute time as her buffer zone. The radio, or a CD, can help her unwind or relax (though too much relaxation is not a good thing when she’s driving). Maybe Sandra unwinds with humor. CD’s or certain radio stations may evoke chuckles, guffaws, or belly laughs — all good for her health. Music is powerful! It can calm us down or rev us up. For others, a silent ride home is what they need.

Sandra could stop at the gym on her way home or take her walking shoes from her trunk and pull into the local park for a brisk walk. For many people some time in nature can be very calming.

Not everyone has a drive between home and work or the time to stop off. Once home what can Sandra do to help with her transition? If she’s coming home to others who are waiting for her, she needs their help and cooperation. Some folks need some “alone” time before they are ready to be social. Perhaps Sandra likes to slip in the house unnoticed, go into her bedroom, change out of her work clothes, spend a few minutes at the computer, and stretch a little bit before coming out to take on the rest of her day. This would be hard if she didn’t have her family’s cooperation and understanding — that she needs those few minutes before she’s ready to be a part of the family.

Be planful in setting up a personal buffer zone. What kind of activity helps you switch gears from your work life to your home life? You may need to have more than one option depending on what’s going on in your life on any given day.

How will you build some regular time in each day for this?

If you live with others, let them know the importance of your buffer zone. Make sure they understand that a little regular buffer time can help you be more healthy and available to them the rest of the time.

Transitioning is an investment in your well-being, one that pays big dividends.

Authors: Rachel Schwarzendruber, M.Ed., Family Life Educator, and Ellen Burton, M.S.
Cathy Colbert Inman, LCSW
Research Content Editor: Angela R. Wiley, Ph.D., Family Life Specialist

- University of Illinois
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Local Extension Councils Cooperating

University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.