

The work-home transition conundrum

By Pamela Enders

Glen's family had begun to avoid him in the evenings. He dragged himself home after a long day and tiring commute with no energy and little patience to deal with his two kids and his wife. The children complained, "Daddy seems grouchy all the time now." Glen's wife was frustrated and concerned. When she asked Glen about the problem, he could only say he was tired and working too hard. Neither Glen nor his wife knew what to do to rectify the situation.

It seemed logical that Glen — the managing partner of a large law firm — would be tired. His responsibilities were many and onerous. The firm depended on him to be a strong and capable leader, but that often meant dealing with political in-fighting, personality conflicts and making tough and sometimes risky decisions affecting everyone. There was always someone angry at him. He was becoming less capable of leaving work at work.

Glen's problem is not unique. Many lawyers ask me how to keep the stress of work back at the office. It seems work worries too easily contaminate home life, making everyone miserable. So, what's the solution?

This dilemma reminds me of a friend who said that when she was growing up in the 1950s in an affluent suburb, every workday around 5 pm her stay-at-home mom would ensure the children were well-scrubbed and presentable. Then she would prepare a pitcher of martinis. As soon as her husband came home from work, she would welcome him, help him get comfortable in the living room, bring in the kids for a quick hello, remove the kids (who were told to play quietly in another room), and pour her husband a nicely chilled martini. If he was in a mood to talk, she would stay and join him. If he was

not, she would return to the kitchen and he would sip his drink while reading the evening paper. Later, the family enjoyed a pleasant dinner and the rest of their evening.

Such a scenario seems laughable today. But it is instructive: Notice how this family devised a way for the working husband to make a transition from work-life to home-life.

I'm not advocating a return to a 1950s lifestyle nor advising gulping martinis as a way to manage stress, but it is worthwhile to consider the idea of a ritual designed to ease and mark the transition from one realm to another.

Glen realized that, like a sponge, he was absorbing all the tension and friction in his firm. On his drive home, he continued to think about work until he arrived home, feeling saturated with the day's stress. He had no technique for "wringing out the sponge." Once he walked in the door, he was too flooded with work woes to be present for his family.

Although Glen liked the *idea* of a ritual to mark and ease the transition, he thought it wouldn't be right to take the time to engage in one. After all, he tended to work late and felt he had to rush home to be able to spend some time with his kids. Plus, his wife also worked and he knew it was-

n't fair that she should take care of everything. At the same time, Glen realized the way things were at present meant he was not able to be the kind of father and husband he wanted to be.

Glen was willing to try out some transition rituals. One technique we devised was as follows: Once he arrived home, rather than immediately go inside, he would sit in his car



about 10 minutes and engage in a meditation exercise. Not an easy task for an action-oriented, take-charge guy. The meditation I taught Glen is a variation of what is called a “breath watching meditation.” Here’s how it goes:

1. Sit quietly and close your eyes.
2. Simply notice the rise and fall of your breath.
3. Now, inhale slowly through your nose and, with your mind’s eye, see a beautiful, pure white cloud fill your lungs completely.
4. Suspend your breath for three to five seconds and watch the clean air travel through your body.
5. Imagine the white cloud reaching and removing all the toxic worry you are holding.
6. Exhale and watch the toxic cloud exit the nostrils. See it dissolve and disappear.
7. Tell yourself each time you do this you are removing more and more of the toxic worry and stress and readying yourself to be present for your family.
8. Repeat this process at least 10 times.

Once finished with his meditation, Glen could go inside.

The second step was for Glen to say hello to everyone and immediately go to his room to change his clothes. Shedding work clothes and putting on casual attire helped to underscore the work-home transition and also helped Glen feel more relaxed. Prior to this, thinking he didn’t have time to change clothes, Glen would merely loosen his tie and take off his suit jacket. The few short minutes he spent changing clothes also helped Glen to ease into family life.

These techniques helped Glen considerably. He began to look forward to his meditations and his family, noticing a more relaxed Glen, gladly accommodated him. His kids were curious about what Daddy was “doing out there in the car” so Glen taught them how to meditate, too. Now sometimes the whole family meditates for a few moments in the evening. Engaging children in a transition ritual allows the stressed parent(s) to de-stress while spending time with the kids and it teaches children valuable skills. Plus, it’s fun!

There are many possible variations to the strategy devised for Glen. Single people or those without children have more options. A busy young litigator decided to unwind by having a cup of herbal tea when she arrived home. A harried couple took a brief walk before dinner. An embattled district attorney sweated it out in the gym after work. Another working couple took turns listing the three best and worst things that happened that day and then agreed not to talk about work any further. An overworked associate took a shower as soon as she got home, symbolizing her washing the stress away.

Like Glen, each of these individuals realized the need to explicitly mark the transition between work and home. They discovered ways to leave work at work and embrace the comfort of home. ☺

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