



# Work-Family Conflict: The Importance of Maintaining a Balance for Healthcare Workers

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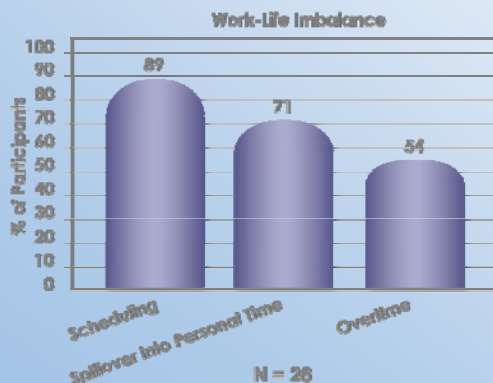


## Introduction

The equilibrium between healthcare workers' professional and personal lives is increasingly strained due to high demands from both work and home. The effects of this negative work-family balance can lead to emotional conflict and disrupt the hospital environment, placing undue burdens on an already stressed work force. Work-Family Conflict (WFC) is identified as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Frone & Bellavia, 2004 115). The likelihood that an individual may experience WFC is increased when these two domains overlap or their 'borders' become less well-defined (Frone & Bellavia, 2004 121). In a qualitative study of BC frontline healthcare workers, we examined the levels and effects of WFC in the workplace.

## Study Design

The first phase of a five phase action research initiative to evaluate interventions that improve the mental health of hospital workers included 28 focus groups with 187 frontline workers (nurses, care aides, and unit clerks). The focus group schedule was based on a comprehensive work stress model developed by Dr. Robyn Gershon at Columbia University. A "constant comparison" method was used to perform a thematic analysis of the data. Every fourth focus group was double coded (average Kappa was .66).



## Results

Three key issues emerged in focus groups as particular situations in which frontline workers experienced Work-Family Conflict including scheduling, spillover into personal life, and overtime.

### Scheduling

In focus groups, 89% of frontline workers cited scheduling and the frequent requests to work on schedule days off as causes of Work-Family Conflict. Frontline workers repeatedly reported this to be an instigator of stress, guilt and frustration, providing a key illustration of stress caused from work interfering with home life:

*"They phoned me everyday of my sick days asking me to come to work."*

*"I find a real stressor is being called every day off, over and over and over. For awhile there I was actually having anxiety attacks when the phone rang because I felt so guilty."*

*"You start playing this mind game [with] the scheduling and nothing is consistent and will I get the work and I've only got three days and I guess I'd better work four more in a row, and by the third one you're tired so you phone in sick."*

*"I think we see a lot of, again with this primary 85% female workforce, there are a lot of family care issues, and the real lack of flexibility in work schedules."*

### Spillover Into Personal Life

A second major concern was that even in situations where work does not actively interfere with home life, many healthcare workers found it difficult to forget the everyday stresses of work. This can cause the individual's personal life to suffer as one nurse disclosed:

*"When I get home I don't have a lot left to give... Your family life does suffer."*

*"I'd come home and I'd be wondering, you know, 'How is that patient doing? Was that... Did I do that right? Maybe I shouldn't have done it that way,' and it was exhausting."*

*"When I did nights I took home a lot of irritability.... Because nurses give so much of themselves at work... because we aren't still getting a lot of support. It's hard when you go home too. Who else that isn't in the profession really understands?"*

### Overtime

The third issue that emerged with nurses reporting that they were consistently pressured to work overtime, with negative consequences for their energy levels and their personal lives:

*"We have people who also are doing a lot of overtime and who maybe shouldn't because they are burnt."*

*"I'm very conscientious about putting in the computer my unavailable days. [But] I'm called on those days, offered overtime, pressured to come in. Over and over."*

*"I'm often here 7 days a week. For the last 10 days, I've probably been here everyday either working overtime or for a meeting."*

## Solutions

While focus group participants mostly suggested that a personalized scheduling system and improved work environment would help ease the amount of WFC in their lives, their solutions were varied. Quotes regarding the top three WFC concerns - scheduling, spillover into personal life, and overtime are presented below.

### Scheduling

*"I think if you're to look back at the scheduling factor, you know, and if people had preset schedules, like in the past, that would really resolve some, quite a few of the issues and people will answer their phone if it's called. And then your casual pool will be available to pick up the slack."*

Promoting balance through health authority recognition of problem, programs and culture:

*"They need to start accommodating and realizing there are people that have a personal life and you have to have balance in your life."*

### Spillover Into Personal Life

Frontline workers recommended a number of approaches to dealing with stress at work, such as critical incident stress management programs that provide quick response in a variety of ways, and encouraging taking breaks in a way that fits with the job.

### Rapid CISM:

*"We really should get us all together before the end of the shift and have a bit of a talk about what happened."*

*"It's always interesting to me when you look at fire departments and ambulance service, when they have an ugly situation happen, they are pulled off immediately and debriefed."*

### Promoting the culture of taking breaks:

*"Trauma's coming in and you don't have time to finish your lunch or anything else... so you just can't be wandering around willy-nilly."*

### Education for Spouse:

*"So that's a big intervention; take-your-spouse-to-work day... It would be useful for a lot of people, I think."*

### Overtime

Adequate staffing levels:

*"Unfortunately, we need more staff."*

*"If you want to take an afternoon off, you make up time somewhere else, or you take it off as vacation or whatever. You can't do that when you're under staffed."*

Culture - No pressure to take extra shifts :

*"You're responsible - the reason why you can't work is because I don't want to, end of story, the answer is no... Because you do not have to justify why you are not coming to work on your days off or why you are not working overtime."*