

Achieving Work-Life Balance

The keys to maintaining healthy family relationships?
Communication, empathy & patience.

By Tim Dietz, MA, LPC

The first 20 years of my fire-service career, I lived fairly close to my fire station. After work, I had a short 10- to 15-minute commute home—not enough time to transition from fire captain/paramedic to husband and dad. When I got home, I would plant my butt into my rocker-recliner and turn on the TV. Depending on how stressful/busy work had been, I would remain there, mindlessly flipping through the channels for 1 or 2 hours, trying to put the last shift to rest. Unfortunately, my wife and kids hadn't seen me for 24 hours. My sons who were excited that daddy was home, and my wife was interested in how my shift had gone, and they all wanted some of this "transition time." It took my family a while, but they eventually learned that when dad comes home from work and plants his butt into his chair, you better leave him alone, or he would get pretty irritable.

After my transition time, when I was ready to integrate myself back into civilian family life, my wife would ask how work went, or she would ask about emergency incidents she had heard about on the news. I would think, I just spent the last 2 hours putting this stuff away. The last thing I want to do is talk about it. My answers to her questions tended to be short or sarcastic. I did not want to talk about work. However, if we went to the store or the park, and I ran into another firefighter, I would excitedly talk about the last shift, my crew, the station, things we had seen, what we had done to mitigate the problem and stupid political decisions. My wife would watch these exchanges and later would ask, "How come you can talk to them about work, but not me? You've cut me out of a third of your life." As much as this hurt, I did not have a response. She was right. I had excluded her from that part of my life. My excuse for this behavior was that I did not want to traumatize her with some of the horrible things I had seen, but in reality, I think it was because I felt she didn't understand my job. When I would tell another firefighter we did a vertical vent or a VES at an apartment fire, or cardio verted a patient, the other firefighter would nod and share their own experiences. If I used any of those terms with my wife, she would want me to explain what they meant. It became easier to say, "I wasn't there" or "I didn't do anything" than to explain things to her.

Excluding my wife from the realities of my work culture and its hierarchies had other consequences. When I did share frustrations about work, she didn't always know how to respond. In her attempts to help, she offered well-meaning advice that was a bit off target for a public-safety employee:

"Tell the chief you need more overtime."

"Tell them you need that fourth firefighter on the ladder truck."

"Tell them they should provide different equipment."

"Tell them you shouldn't have to respond to calls like that."

"Tell your boss to F-off."

She didn't understand that I was simply venting:

- I just need someone to listen. (I didn't need her to fix anything.)
- I didn't want advice. (Unless I requested it.)
- Bitching was therapeutic.

These rules of mine were unwritten and uncommunicated, so my wife didn't know what they were.

How about Making Decisions?

"...most [first responders] hate being hit with problems the minute they walk in the door. They have been problem-solving all day and need a break. They may be so reluctant to engage in meaningful communication that they appear disinterested, passive, or withholding when in fact they are simply tired of dealing with problems." (Kirschman, E., Kamena, M., Fay, J. (2014). "Counseling cops, what clinicians need to know." Pg. 201. New York, NY: The Guilford Press).

What we sometimes fail to realize is that while we are at work, our partners have been dealing with their own set of problems: sick kids, power outages, household finances, etc. They also need a break from making decisions.

I love my wife, and I enjoy doing things with her. But here's an example of a typical conversation I would have had with her during my time on the fire department:

Wife: "Do you want to go out for dinner tonight?"

Me: "Yes, I would like that."

Wife: "Where would you like to go?"

Me: "I don't care"

Wife: "Care!"

Me: "Really, I don't care!"

Wife: "I want you to pick!"

Me: "You know I'll eat anything. It really doesn't matter where we go!"

Wife: "I picked last time. You need to choose!"

Me: "I'll cook dinner tonight. We're staying home."

My brain, at that time, was wired for life-or-death decisions. If I encountered an emergency problem, I'd fix it. Unfortunately, picking a place to eat is not a life-or-death situation, and my crazy brain would not fire off to make this particular decision. I could recognize we did have a problem (my wife wants to go out to dinner, but I can't decide where to go). As an action-oriented problem solver, I would choose to stay home and make dinner. Problem solved! This inability to make mundane (in my mind) decisions created challenges at home (but it made me a great cook).

Empathy?

Let's say you respond to a local shopping-center parking lot because someone got their finger caught in their car door. You would take care of the injured party with care and compassion, but most likely, you'd be thinking, "We're taking a half-million-dollar apparatus and an entire crew out of service for this?" My family was getting ready to spend Thanksgiving Day at my sister's house. I was outside feeding our animals, and my wife was loading the trunk of our car with food. She accidentally closed her thumb in the trunk, and she was stuck. I saw her reaching around with her other hand to try to free herself. It looked painful! By the time I reached her, her thumb was smashed and already turning dark blue, and she had tears in her eyes. I knew it must hurt, but how sympathetic do you suppose I was? My paramedic brain, wired for ABCs, said, "Stand down. This isn't going to kill her." I offered to heat a paper clip and drill a hole through her thumbnail to relieve the pressure. My wife found no sympathy in that offer. She needed and wanted someone to acknowledge her situation and empathize with her. At this point in my career/life, I couldn't.

Work Schedule & Our Partner's Independence

Our jobs require someone to be on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Our families come to understand that we will occasionally miss important events, such as holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, school plays and sporting events. We might be at work when the power goes out, the children are sick or other household emergencies arise. For this reason, first-responder families become very independent. My wife learned how to solve circuit-breaker issues, nurse sick kids and family pets, deal with automobile issues, perform minor household repairs, drive in the snow and ice, and investigate strange noises in the night—all on her own because I was at work. She became pretty independent. As our families become more self-sufficient and capable without our help, it can make us feel we have lost some control. It can sting a bit to come home and see our family has learned to get things done their way—which in their minds is working out pretty well.

Inherent Risks of Job

I was working with a fire department that had suffered multiple firefighter fatalities in a catastrophic building collapse. During our conversations, a firefighter shared that his wife wanted him to quit his job. He said that everything he ever told his wife about how safe the job was and the predictability of the fire environment had been proven false at that event. Not only did he lose friends, he said, but now his family wanted him to end a career he loved.

Understand the Difference Between Home & Work

Your family members are not your co-workers. The rules of working in a paramilitary occupation, with strict operational policies and guidelines, are all thrown out the window when you get home. Give or take an order at an emergency scene, and that task gets done. Tell your kid to pick up something

at home, and they might not complete that task in as timely a manner as you would like. We learn from day one that our work facilities and equipment belong to the taxpayer, and we need to care for them properly. Fire stations are typically very organized and clean. So are the apparatus. We don't always go home to that same clean/organized environment. We have to learn to let that be OK.

Lessons Learned

The fire service is the best gig in the world. Every time we turn a wheel, we have an opportunity to make a difference in someone's life. We take our jobs seriously, train hard and are good at what we do—maybe even the best. But if we're giving 100 percent at work, how much are we leaving for our personal and family life?

Current research shows that relationships outside of work that incorporate social and emotional support from others lead to more protected physical and mental health. ("Social and emotional support and its implication for health." Reblin M, Uchino BN. *Current Opinion Psychiatry*. March 2008.)

- Embrace the folks at home. Invite them into your fire-service life and communicate about what you do.
- If you've had a rough day, it's okay to let loved ones know that and to tell them you don't want to talk about it at that moment.
- If you're tired when you get home, play with the kids anyway. They need you.
- If you have a hard time making decisions when you get home, schedule fun stuff ahead of time, when you do feel more capable of making decisions, so the day is planned when you get home.
- Continuously remind yourself that if you were unable to be a firefighter because of injury or illness, it is your family who will be by your side for the rest of your life. Invest time in these relationships.

You are in the business of seeing bad things happen to people. In fact, you get a paycheck because bad things happen to people. For some reason, we think we're immune from these tragedies. If we have one advantage over the general population, it is that we know how precious life is and how quickly things can change. Be good at your job, but also be good at being a son, daughter, partner, aunt, uncle, dad or mom. **BS**



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