

## **Guilt verses gut: Assistant professor helps working mothers find balance with exercise, children**

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(Medical Xpress) -- Guilt is a major obstacle working mothers face for staying active, according to Emily Mailey. She is a Kansas State University assistant professor of kinesiology who researches and develops interventions to promote physical activity among working mothers.

"The level of physical activity among working moms is quite low compared to a lot of other populations because there are so many barriers that the moms are trying to overcome," Mailey said. "They have very limited free time because of work, family and household responsibilities, and on top of all that, they feel guilty for taking time away from their children to do something for themselves."

As a full-time working mother herself, Mailey understands the guilt factor and other challenges many [mothers face](#) while balancing work, children and an exercise regimen. She reminds herself that spending 20-30 minutes is better than no exercise and she is a better mom because of it.

"Exercise is not selfish," Mailey said. "If you view exercise in the context of being less stressed, having more energy and setting a good example for your kids, you realize that you're actually benefiting your family by doing something good for your mind and body."

If the guilt is too strong to separate mother from child, she recommends incorporating children into the workout. For infants or toddlers, she said mothers can try a "baby circuit": doing push-ups over the baby and kissing his or her nose when going down; holding the baby while doing lunges; or sitting the baby on your lap for situps. With school-age kids, have a dance party to lively music. With teenagers, start a pedometer challenge to see who can complete more steps.

"You eliminate the guilt factor because you are spending time with them, and you feel good that you are setting a good example for them while still getting in the exercise that you want," Mailey said.

Time is another large barrier for many moms, Mailey said. She recommends starting with small measurable goals and scheduling exercise on the calendar so it's treated as a priority. Being flexible and creative are the keys to achieving exercise goals when unexpected events interfere with exercise plans -- as they invariably do from time to time, she said.

"You don't have to go to a gym and exercise for an hour," Mailey said. "You can break it up throughout the day and do 10 minutes here or there. Always be thinking about opportunities to keep moving. We need to be able to redefine exercise and think about it more broadly."

Mailey recommends simple changes throughout the day, such as a 10-minute video in the morning, a 10-minute power walk over lunch and an active game with the kids in the evening.

"That way you can still get the recommended 30 minutes each day without feeling like it is cutting into your life or schedule," Mailey said. "Find something you really enjoy and create goals to stick with it."

Although weight loss is one of the largest motivators for starting an

exercise regimen, Mailey tells mothers to focus on benefits that can be enjoyed immediately, like improved self-confidence and feelings of personal accomplishment.

"I try to emphasize goals that are focused on what you are doing as opposed to an outcome," Mailey said. "It's OK for weight loss to be a motivator for exercise, but if that is your only motive it is really easy to get discouraged early on if you are not getting the results you want."

Different people use different strategies for meeting their goals, Mailey said. Some people use the buddy system while others use pedometers to track their progress. Some women also find a set exercise program helps them stay on track.

"A lot of the moms I've worked with have had success with the 'Couch to 5K' program because it provides a set plan and you're working toward an end goal, but it is also flexible so you can progress at your own pace," Mailey said. The program offers a way for people to eventually work up to running three miles on a regular basis.

If personal benefits are not enough, benefits in the workplace can also be a motivator. Recent studies have shown the benefits many people experience from an [exercise regimen](#) -- such as clarity of mind, confidence, increased memory and decreased afternoon fatigue -- can help improve job performance.

"One of common responses I hear from people is they usually have more energy throughout the day on the days they exercise," Mailey said. "As a new mother myself, I'm not going to promise that you aren't going to still be exhausted by the end of the day, but I do see an advantage of being more focused at work."

Mailey said she will continue to develop programs to promote [exercise](#)

among moms in Manhattan and beyond.

Provided by Kansas State University

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