

Avoidance strategies can be valuable stress reliever, says study on work/life/school balance

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If achieving a work/life balance wasn't hard enough, researchers say many of us are juggling a third factor: school.

That creates conflicts, say Bonnie Cheng, a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and Julie McCarthy, an associate professor at the Rotman School and the University of Toronto Scarborough, often resulting in [dissatisfaction](#) in the area that caused that conflict. For example, skipping a family function to stay late at work can lead to less satisfaction with work.

But avoidance techniques can help, their most recent study shows. Using a group of [undergraduate students](#) who also worked outside of school and had [family responsibilities](#), the researchers surveyed them at two different points in time to gauge how much conflict students were experiencing from their competing responsibilities, the different coping mechanisms they used to deal with them, and how much satisfaction they derived from their activities.

The study found that students who used [avoidance strategies](#), such as not dwelling on their problems, were better able to manage conflict across work, family, and school, and experienced more satisfaction.

"Our intuitive notion of avoidance is that it's counter-productive, that it's running away from your problems," says Cheng. But, she says, there are

different kinds of avoidance.

"We found that while wishing for your problems to magically disappear is counterproductive, the process of taking your mind off the problems at hand actually helped people manage multiple role responsibilities and increased their satisfaction."

The trick, she stresses, is not allowing avoidance to slip into escapism. The finding is equally applicable to any situation where people are juggling multiple role responsibilities, including volunteering and coaching.

The key point for managing multiple roles is that people are giving their minds the occasional break.. Workplaces and schools can do this by providing places such as lounges where people can go to detach a little, by socializing, meditating, listening to music, or whatever works best for them.

Cheng says the study's findings point to strategies that can empower individuals to manage work, family, and school responsibilities.

"That's not to devalue organizational initiatives," she says. "We see this as something people can do on their own, in tandem with organizational initiatives," she says.

More information: The paper will be published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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