

Repeatedly thinking about work-family conflict linked to health problems

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Kelly D. Davis

Thinking over and over again about conflicts between your job and personal life is likely to damage both your mental and physical health, research from Oregon State University suggests.

The study included more than 200 people, with results showing that "repetitive thought" was a pathway between work-family conflict and negative outcomes in six different health categories.

As the term suggests, repetitive thought regarding work-family conflict refers to thinking repeatedly and attentively about the parts of your job and your [personal life](#) that clash with each other: for example, that late-afternoon meeting that prevents you from attending your son's baseball game. It's a maladaptive coping strategy that impedes daily recovery from stress.

Kelly D. Davis of OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences was the lead author on the project funded by Pennsylvania State University's Social Science Research Institute and Penn State's Center for Healthy Aging.

The journal *Stress & Health* recently published the results.

Davis, an assistant professor in the CPHHS School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences, says repetitive thought over work-family conflict keeps the stressor active and thus gets in the way of recovery.

The study involved 203 adults ages 24 to 76. Each was in a romantic relationship, and roughly two-thirds had at least one child at home.

Results showed a link between repetitive thought and negative outcomes in the health categories of life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, fatigue, perceived health, and health conditions.

Positive affect is the extent to which a person subjectively experiences positive moods, and negative affect is the extent to which someone experiences negative moods. In this study, health conditions referred to a list of 22 conditions or problems, such as stroke or diabetes. Participants

were scored based on how many times they answered yes.

In the category of perceived health, participants were asked to rate their health on a five-point scale.

"The main objective of this study was to test a conceptual model in which repetitive thought explained the association between work-family conflict and health," Davis said. "There was support for repetitive thought as a mediator in the association between work-family conflict and all six health outcomes."

Repetitive thought is related to two other types of cognition that also can have adverse effects on [health](#): rumination and worry. Rumination is persistent, redundant thinking that usually looks backward and is associated with depression; worry is also persistent, redundant thinking but tends to look forward and is typically more associated with anxious apprehension.

"Practitioners can assist individuals facing the dual demands of work and family by reducing repetitive thought, and the related issues of worry and rumination," Davis said.

One technique that can help is mindfulness: intentionally paying attention to the present-moment experience, such as physical sensations, perceptions, affective states, thoughts and imagery, in a nonjudgmental way.

"You stay in the moment and acknowledge what you are feeling, recognize that those are real feelings, and process them, putting things in perspective," Davis said. "In the hypothetical baseball game example, the person could acknowledge the disappointment and frustration he was feeling as legitimate, honest feelings, and then also think in terms of 'these meeting conflicts don't happen that often, there are lots of games

left for me to watch my child play, etc."

Davis also points out that the burden for coping with work-family conflict shouldn't fall solely on the employee.

"There needs to be strategies at the organizational level as well as the individual level," she said. "For example, a business could implement mindfulness training or other strategies in the workplace that make it a more supportive culture, one that recognizes employees have a life outside of work and that sometimes there's conflict. There can be a good return on investment for businesses for managing work-family stress, because positive experiences and feelings at home can carry over to work and vice versa."

Work-family conflict is not just a women's issue or even just a parent's issue, Davis notes, given the number of workers who are caring for their own mother and/or father.

"Planning ahead and having a backup plan, having a network to support one another, those things make you better able to reduce work-family conflict," Davis said. "But it shouldn't just rest on the shoulders of the individual. We need changes in the ways in which organizations treat their employees. We can't deny the fact that work and family influence one another, so by improving the lives of employees, you get that return on investment with positive work and family lives spilling over onto one another."

Policy changes are particularly important to lower-income workers, Davis says.

"Not all of us are so fortunate to have backup plans for our family responsibilities to stop us from repetitively thinking about work-family conflict," she said. "It's the organizational support and culture that matter

most. Knowing there's a policy you can use without backlash maybe is almost as beneficial as actually using the policy. It's also important for managers and executives to be modeling that too, going to family events and scheduling time to fit all of their roles."

More information: Kelly D. Davis et al, Investigating the work-family conflict and health link: Repetitive thought as a mechanism, *Stress and Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/smi.2711](https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2711)

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