

A focus on the present may help single mothers feel more 'in control' of their lives

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Molly Minnen. Credit: Steven Mackay for Virginia Tech

When facing high demands from family life, working single mothers who have a present-time mindset—in contrast to the tendency to focus on the past or future—may feel more "in control" of their leisure time,

according to a new study headed by Virginia Tech researchers.

In turn, these feelings of control over time away from work may support these single [mothers](#) in fitting healthy habits such as [exercise](#) into their busy schedules. The effect of control on exercise time was unique, in that this perceived control did not affect consumption of unhealthy food or excess alcohol, the researchers wrote.

Exercise, of course, has been linked to better, long-term physical and [mental health](#) in scores of studies.

The National Science Foundation-supported study was recently published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, a publication of the International Association of Applied Psychology. Spearheading the study was Charles Calderwood, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, part of the Virginia Tech College of Science.

"Although evening family demands can present a barrier to leisure-time exercise for working sole mothers, this health-impairing relationship is not inevitable," Calderwood said. "Instead, focusing more on the present / living in the moment helps these working parents feel that they have greater control over their time, even in the face of elevated family demands. In turn, they can harness this control to support their engagement in exercise from day-to-day."

Working with Calderwood were Molly Minnen, a [graduate student](#) in psychology, and researchers from Rice University and Georgia Institute of Technology. The team followed 102 single, working mothers during a seven-day period. The study focused on how the mindset of these women—while balancing work and family tasks—impacted their pursuit of healthy behaviors during their downtime.

Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that a working mom's evening

family demands make exercise less likely. Yet, it was specifically one's sense of control over how to spend their evening that was diminished by high family demands, and that made all the difference in whether they made time for themselves—and their health—amid hectic schedules. And individuals who typically focused on living in the moment saw a reduced impact of evening family demands on the perceptions of control central to exercising.

"Present-focused mothers who chose to prioritize their health weren't necessarily more or less busy than mothers who did not exercise as much," said Danielle King, an assistant professor of psychological science at Rice and one of the study's co-authors. "A key difference was mothers feeling more in control of their choices and capable of choosing to prioritize their needs."

What comes next for this study? Calderwood posits the design of interventions that can improve health-behavior engagement for working sole mothers and other individuals facing elevated family demands, such as individuals caring for a dependent adult relative. Secondly, Calderwood said it is possible that other healthy behaviors such as increasing hours of sleep could be enhanced through a similar process to what was observed for exercise in the current study.

Numerous past and current studies on working [single mothers](#) have tended to focus on demonstrating the potential for occupational health disparities, such as lower levels of occupational health, relative to partnered parents, with less focus on the day-to-day lived experiences and health behaviors of members of this population.

A looming question that remains is whether similar processes would apply in other populations that face elevated family demands, such as working single fathers.

"Although there have been studies to compare the experiences of working sole mothers and working sole fathers, to my knowledge, there has not yet been an investigation of the process through which [family](#) demands influence recovery experiences or health behaviors from day-to-day in working sole fathers," Calderwood added. "We chose to focus our initial investigation of these processes on working sole mothers because the occupational [health](#) disparities they face may be particularly acute relative to a number of other comparison groups in the broader workforce."

Minnen, the graduate student working in Calderwood's Work Stress and Recovery Lab, focused part of her efforts on theoretical model building for the study.

Her hope for the study's impact: "I hope this study helps bring unique populations that may be left out by traditional sampling strategies into the spotlight for work and well-being research," Minnen said. "Hopefully the community of work and well-being researchers will continue to consider the unique characteristics of life as a single mother and work towards tangible recommendations and solutions to improve their well-being."

More information: Charles Calderwood et al, Understanding how family demands impair health behaviors in working sole mothers: The role of perceived control over leisure time, *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/aphw.12307](https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12307)

Provided by Virginia Tech

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