

6-1-2005

Burnout: How Does Extension Balance Job and Family?

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Recommended Citation

Ensle, K. M. (2005). Burnout: How Does Extension Balance Job and Family?. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(3), Article 6. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss3/6>

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Burnout: How Does Extension Balance Job and Family?

Abstract

Avoiding burnout by balancing job and family is a necessity for Extension employees. This article reviews several state efforts regarding employee loss and retention. Keys to job satisfaction are discussed along with the coping skills needed to prevent burnout. Stress reduction ideas, a review of a successful wellness program, and a description of the young "Generation X" agent, and their challenges working for Extension are included. Suggestions for changes in the Cooperative Extension System to reduce stress and prevent burnout will challenge the reader.

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Are you overstressed, feeling tightness in your back and shoulders? Are you having difficulty sleeping? It may include a chronic feeling of "being sick", "overtired", or "fatigued." In the Extension office do you ask yourself, "How am I balancing my job and my family?" Let us take a look at several states and how they are addressing the problem of burnout and related issues.

There are pros and cons when working for Extension. The job offers a flexible work schedule, but requires many night and weekend meetings. The employee derives much personal satisfaction from educating the clientele served, but the enjoyment of teaching and working with the public often gets sidelined for endless paperwork with unrealistic due dates. The position requires a person with a high energy level who is extremely well organized and a good communicator; however, the employee is often either "left on their own with no supervision" or over supervised and told there is only ONE way to get the job done. Burnout often is the result of overwork, not dislike of the work itself. Being an Extension agent has many positives as well as the negatives.

Extension Programs That Address Employee Burnout

Burnout often happens slowly. Some states have lost staff due to heavy work loads and lack of time with family and friends. A few states, such as Pennsylvania, have made efforts toward employee retention. Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension provided in-service training to address staff needs regarding home and workplace issues with support from the Dean and administration. Educational sessions were offered to agents, staff and volunteers on managing their personal and professional lives. Participants evaluated these sessions very highly and indicated the information was practical and useful.

Other states have addressed personnel issues differently. In Kansas in the mid-1990's, an informal network of Extension professionals explored creating a healthier work environment. Eight organizational workshops were offered on "Change and Renewal" with a document called *Caring People Respond: CPR for Extension Health and Maintenance*, used as the basis for the workshops. Its purpose was to foster pride and encourage responsibility on the job both personally and professionally. A set of principles called the "ethics of caring" were written. Extension personnel were asked to rate their job satisfaction identifying the most valued characteristics of the workplace. Results showed:

- The staff liked the "teamwork" of Extension;
- They liked the feeling of belonging to a group that cares about others;

- They liked the opportunity to be self-directed;
- They enjoyed the variety within their job descriptions; and
- They valued their administrators and those in supervisory roles.

The perceived barriers identified were lack of resources and overall effectiveness of the organization as a whole.

Vermont Extension (UVE) researchers conducted a study on health and wellness of Extension faculty and staff. Administration wanted to boost morale and performance of employees, while the researchers conducting the study were more interested in the type of activities that should be included in a wellness program. Overall, the interest by administrators coupled with the survey results led to the creation of a strong state-wide program. Survey findings presented to UVE administration included:

1. Employee health promotion (wellness) programs should be available to all Extension faculty and staff.
2. Program goals and suggestions by employees through questionnaires and focus groups should be made central to the new program being developed.
3. All wellness offerings should be made available to all who wish to participate.
4. The Extension Wellness program model should be integrated into all University of Vermont programs with a special emphasis on role modeling for wellness.
5. The Extension Wellness Program should become the model health promotion program for all University of Vermont faculty and staff as a permanent program.

Although this project was part of the USDA "Decisions for Health" initiative, it was not federally funded like many USDA initiatives. Vermont Cooperative Extension used state funds to get this project activated, and Vermont Extension has continued its commitment to wellness by serving as the role model to the university. As a result of this wellness initiative, the University of Vermont now provides all employees with additional fringe benefits that support wellness, including exercise and fitness activities, lifestyle enhancement workshops and seminars, educational programs on stress management, seminars on balancing work and leisure, and relaxation training.

In Illinois between 1979 and 1982, field agents began leaving their positions within 4 years of hiring. Concern about the costs of hiring and training encouraged Illinois Extension administrators to review the "stayers" and "leavers" in the system. More leavers were found in agricultural positions than in home economics or 4-H. It was found that the leavers were not more dissatisfied than the stayers regarding in-service training, guidance, and subject matter support. The three reasons Illinois field agents cited for leaving Extension positions were:

1. Changes in the family situation (marriage, divorce, spouse changed job, etc.)
2. Family moving (outside of travel distance to work area)
3. Too much time away from family

The concern of the Illinois Extension administration was that *both* stayers and leavers were not happy with the Extension System as an organization. The morale problems of employees affected their job output and produced high levels of stress. To reduce this stress, additional supervisory trainings were developed for those in leadership positions, and new job descriptions were written for agents that more closely tied to the work they actually performed. Work expectations were carefully reviewed with new employees after hiring. Unfortunately, Illinois never addressed the "too much time away from family" issue nor clearly defined their "compensatory time" program. Both of these issues greatly affect agents' ability to balance work and family.

Defining Burnout and the Extension Job

Balancing Extension work with family obligations is not easy. Fetsch and Kennington reported in 1997 the history of balancing work and family within Extension. Researchers in states such as Ohio, Minnesota, Kentucky, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Colorado have conducted studies with Extension agents in the areas of stress, burnout, and balancing work and family. Research with Extension faculty is scant during the last 20 years, and little can be found in the last 10 years in journal articles.

First, let us define "burnout." Igodan and Newcomb in a 1986 *Journal of Extension* article, "Are You Experiencing Burnout?," defined it as a depletion of oneself by exhausting one's physical and mental resources. It is a process that begins with excessive and prolonged levels of job stress that produces strain in the employee. Either the worker learns to defensively cope with the job, or it may cause a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms cause a change in body

function, attitudes, and actions toward others.

The Extension office is often a hectic place of work. Colleagues are anxious, tense, and possibly unsettled over a variety of county, state, and national issues. Trying to work within multiple systems and reporting to multiple supervisors is very stressful. Agents often are teachers, counselors, information referral agents, and researchers. The agent recognizes the job requires multi-tasking with government, farmers, homemakers, business and industry, local agencies, schools, and youth organizations.

In addition, the land-grant university has its own rules and strategic plan that agents must integrate into their work. Large amounts of required paperwork for both the university and county along with increased service demands from the public and these systems create a double workload. Many feel that it is impossible to get the job done because there are too many requests and not enough staff to meet all the required work. Extension agents often feel "out of control" and unable to meet the demands placed on them by the university and local county government.

Time, funding sources, or the lack of funding, often drive the Extension professional's yearly plan of work. Agents are often asked by the university, the county, or both to find money to pay for their own salary or that of others. This is often challenging and difficult because most agents have had little training in grants writing or contract negotiation. There is no time for boredom or slowing down as the nature of the job is multidimensional. They also need superior communication and negotiation skills for interacting with multiple supervisors, public groups, local government and the university.

For Extension staff in Pennsylvania, Kansas, Vermont, and Illinois, frustration was experienced when the results of educational programs and outreach were not readily evident in the behavior of those who were taught. Documenting impact of programs is often difficult and sometimes impossible to get. Teaching evaluations may show good to excellent results, BUT if the participant does not show behavior change after a period of time, that reflects negatively on the Extension agent and Extension system.

Each Extension agent is an independent teacher, counselor, advisor, and leader who must market his or her individual programs to supervisors, volunteers, colleagues, and the public. A successful agent learns political, social and educational skills to allow navigation within this system that connects counties across the United States with the land-grant system. Besides negotiating systems, the agent needs to balance work and family on a daily basis. A study of Extension staff satisfaction in Rhode Island in 1990 by Mallilo found that job satisfaction depended on a number of factors, however, the most negative job satisfaction factor was salary. Over 81% of the Rhode Island Extension staff felt they were not adequately compensated for the work they did.

Job Satisfaction: Keys to Being a Successful Agent

Job satisfaction in Extension is dependent on many factors. In 1993, a random sample of 301 Extension County Agents working in the Western region of the United States (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) were mailed a questionnaire that centered on coping strategies and effective ways of reducing on-the-job stress. Most of the agents surveyed had more than one program responsibility, 46% were male, and 72% held master's degrees. Seventy-eight percent were married, and 12% were single due to divorce, death, or other reasons. More than 40% had no children presently at home, 38% had 1-2 children at home, and 19.5% had three or more children living at home.

The study rated their job satisfaction, current salary/fringe benefits, amount of authority to run programs, administrative supervisors' support, level of challenge of the job, and opportunity for growth that the job offered. They also rated their satisfaction with the Extension system and their colleagues. Five coping strategies identified by Hamilton, McCubbin, Olson, and Larsen were adapted from the F-COPES (Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales) for use in their study. The five coping strategies were defined as:

1. Acquiring social support and actively engaging support of family, friends, neighbors and extended family,
2. Reframing or redefinition of stressful events at work to make them more manageable,
3. Seeking spiritual support from religious or other sources,
4. Mobilizing individuals to acquire and accept help, and
5. Seeking out resources in the community.

The results of the Western Region survey were analyzed to assess:

- Job satisfaction,
- Attitudes of Extension Agents toward colleagues, and
- Attitude toward Cooperative Extension Service (CES) as an organization.

The factors of job satisfaction for agents included:

- Respondents indicated they were "moderately satisfied" with their jobs, their colleagues and with CES as an Job responsibilities (clearly defined or fuzzy),
- Salary with fringe benefits (enough to live on comfortably),
- Authority to run Extension programs to meet clientele needs,
- Liked by supervisors,
- Opportunity for growth (within the job and the System),
- CES as an organization, and
- Helpful colleagues.

Respondents indicated they were "moderately satisfied" with their jobs, their colleagues and with CES as an organization. When considering overall job satisfaction, as the number of agent responsibilities increased, job satisfaction rate decreased. Agents who had little or no responsibility for children at home were more satisfied with Extension as an organization. Agents most often used reframing and passive appraisal to cope with stressful job situations. Agents who were able to "reframe" stressful situations into positive outcomes were able to cope with stress better and were more satisfied on-the-job. Agents who could not reframe, did not cope well and were unhappy.

Burnout: Extension Agents Need to Learn Coping Skills

Burnout occurs when an employee experiences a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. It causes changes in the emotional, psychological, and physiological body functions. Behaviors including low job performance and poor job satisfaction are evident. Decreased communication, withdrawal, absenteeism, loss of enthusiasm for the job, increased drug and alcohol use, increased marital and family problems, accident proneness, constant job complaints, forgetfulness, poor concentration, and workaholism are all behavioral changes that indicate burnout according to Igodan and Newcomb (1986).

A study of 241 Ohio Extension Agents in 1985 centered on burnout. About 12% had high levels of burnout, but the majority experienced low-level burnout. As a group, 4-H agents experienced the most burnout followed by young, single agents. As job satisfaction decreased, burnout increased. Coping strategies that were successful in helping to prevent burnout were:

1. Developing a realistic picture of oneself (who you are, what you are feeling, why),
2. Setting realistic goals for work and home,
3. Recognizing the symptoms of stress and burnout,
4. Asking for help when it is needed,
5. Developing a support system on the job and at home,
6. Retaining hope,
7. Detaching oneself from the Extension clientele group,
8. Taking time off when it is needed,
9. Maintaining good health habits (good nutrition, fitness and sleep habits),
10. Maintaining an active social life outside of Cooperative Extension,
11. Having professional, organizational involvement while providing collegial support,
12. Using meditation, biofeedback, and relaxation techniques to get rid of stress, and
13. Keeping a positive attitude at all times.

Life balance is critical in reducing stress and the potential of burnout. Wellness is dependent on a continued balance of giving and getting, stress and calm, at work and at home.

Reducing Stress for Extension Employees

Two systematic methods to reduce stress for Extension employees include:

1. Modifying organizational policies and practices that cause stress and

2. Implementing effective Balancing Work and Family Programs.

Both will increase the coping skills and productivity of Extension employees. Stress levels have been widely studied in business but little has been studied in Extension. Major outcomes of reducing stress in business have been achieved by having staff prioritize goals, use daily planners along with developing realistic personal and work management plans. Some state systems like Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension felt that reduction of stress would improve morale. Time management and communication seminars helped Pennsylvania employees avoid burnout and job dissatisfaction. According to Pennsylvania Extension Administration, "attending to the 'human side' of agents is as important, if not more important, than doing the job." Pennsylvania has indeed demonstrated a commitment to maintaining balance between work and family life.

Personal Values of Young Extension Agents: Boomers and Generations X and Y Are Different

Young Extension agents have increased needs for flexible work schedules and child and adult day care. Today's Extension employees are emerging in the workplace with different attitudes and goals for themselves. Younger Extension employees with children are more willing to make sacrifices in their education, career, and their job in exchange for more time with their family or more personal time. As the workforce shifts and baby boomers retire, values of new employees need to be acknowledged by Extension Administration. A major challenge for Extension administrators is to understand how individual values of these young agents are affecting the Extension system. Increased burnout and employee turnover becomes costly to the organization from both economic and time efficiency standpoints.

Personal values and goals of agents of different time periods shape their view of work and family priorities. As the "Baby Boomers" finish up the last decade of their employment, the Generation X and Y agents become the majority of the workforce. The Generation X agents born between 1961 and 1981 are independent thinkers and know their shortcomings. They are sandwiched between their own parents and their children, and they have a different commitment to work and family than the "Baby Boomers." The Xers are willing to sacrifice salary increases and promotion and tenure for more time with family and friends. The Xers value fitness, time with their children, and the institution of marriage. To them, Extension is a "way to make a living." They say, "life is too short to be a workaholic." They ask, "Are we working harder or smarter"?

In 1994, Ohio Cooperative Extension researchers studied Generation X agents. The study revealed that Xers either burned out or decided the pay was too low or their family was more important than the night meetings. Important work issues were:

- Flexible hours,
- Lowered work load,
- Having administrative support,
- Flextime,
- Sabbaticals along with unpaid leave,
- Pre-tax spending accounts,
- Counseling and assistance programs, and
- Stress reduction seminars.

The Ohio study revealed when administrators ignored work/life issues, the employees quit. It often costs the organization up to 150 per cent of the departing employee's salary to replace the agent. Recommendations from the Ohio study encouraged other states to adopt policies that mesh work/life strategies. These strategies should include: flexible work schedules, job sharing, telecommuting, virtual offices, and adding employee leave policies for sick dependents and community volunteer projects.

The Challenge of Working for Extension

In the February 2002 issue of the *Journal of Extension*, Kutilek, Conklin, and Gunderson of Ohio State University discuss "points to ponder" regarding work/life challenges of Extension employees. Extension job positions are multidimensional, often including new projects before the old are completed. Frustration and stress are continuous due to the slowness of finishing many projects. Time frames are much longer due to a variety of factors, including a lack of funding, a long approval process, differences between agent and administrative values, and philosophical differences. University business and county business are separate entities that are handled simultaneously each work day. Volunteer groups, grant-funded programs, and team collaborations are part of the job as well. In addition, agents are expected to be professionally active. Service and Extension practice require establishing partnerships inside and outside the university. These relationships are necessary for writing grants and receiving funds. Without grant funds, the majority of Extension programs today, will be stymied.

In some ways the Extension System gives positive support to employees because it allows the local Extension office to run programs that meet the needs of local residents. On the other hand, the Extension System is very stressful and does not provide help or support directly to local county agents. This causes stress for employees who are left to figure out how to balance work and family

with few or no resources to do so.

Recommendations and Implications

The following are some suggestions for balancing work and family within the Extension System based on information included in this article.

- Create a national task force through CSREES and ECOP on Life Balance, and mandate universities set up a plan for staff that includes stress management, coping strategies, and wellness programs. Make this a national priority of the Extension System, with dollars attached to the Task Force to organize an "Initiative" on Life Balance.
- Require a Life Balance plan within state Extension strategic plans. Balancing work and family must be a priority in the plans of work of individuals, departments, state systems and federal systems.
- Financial resources from USDA should fund Life Balance training for Extension Services across the country. Local Extension administrators need these federal funds to be able to request matching state funds. Both federal and state money would help to build a system that supports balancing work and family roles.
- Administrators need to "walk the talk" and become role models for living a balanced work life.
- Additional money needs to fund research studies that will define programs and policies that provide life balance strategies to help retain Extension employees.
- Communication between federal and state Extension partners and the county agent needs improvement. States need to be linked to a single computer network across the country. This would allow agents in Agriculture, Family & Consumer Sciences, and 4-H, along with specialists to interact as units within their states, region and nationally. Subject matter information, grant writing, safety notification, and discussion within the Extension System need to be part of that system.
- Administrators have the responsibility of communicating employee benefits to their staff. Reminders by e-mail, fax, and phone help busy agents remember to keep these life needs in balance.
- Administrators must help agents plan for sabbatical leaves and encourage time away from regular work to publish and demonstrate the impact of their Extension programs. A rotating schedule of agents eligible for sabbatical leave within the state would help to maintain balance and prevent the department from becoming lopsided in certain expertise.
- A Life Balance Specialist should be identified or hired in each state to offer support for work and family issues. The specialist would be responsible for staff training on stress management, coping skills and burnout prevention programs to create a stronger workforce.
- USDA should fund several research studies on the results of life balance strategies on burnout and the development of staff coping skills. Current research in this area is scant. Knowing the reasons why Extension employees are leaving or staying will help to direct administrative decisions for future hiring and help to create organizational stability.

Conclusion

The individual employee, state administrator, and the Extension system need to support efforts toward stress reduction and burnout prevention. Financial resources are needed to provide wellness and life balance training for all staff through specialist support. Well-designed, quasi-experimental evaluation studies should be conducted in all states on the reasons for and solutions to prevent burnout. Administrative commitment within the land-grant universities is necessary to make balancing work and family a priority. To support a strong, productive Extension workforce, federally funded life balance programs need to be available for all state and federal Extension employees. Only through addressing the work and family issues will Extension be able to continue to be a strong work force providing excellent outreach and education across our nation.

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