**Overcoming Working Mom Burnout**

**Episode 2: Understanding and addressing work-life conflict through behavior change strategies with Researcher Kelly Chandler.**

**Work-life conflict is a tug of war on your time and energy:** I like the metaphor of tug of war: on one side are the work responsibilities and on the other side are the family responsibilities.You only have so much time. You only have so much energy. It's essentially just sort of this tug of war and your time and your energy and on you trying to fulfill these different roles that you have. You're getting burnt out from work. And the demands from that, it's going to conflict with how you're able to perform your job as a partner, as a parent as. The two roles and experiences can actually benefit one another as well. There's something called work, family enrichment enhancement.

**Work-family conflict can affect your health:** Work conflict is pervasive in the US among working adults. Work family conflict is associated with a host of negative consequences in terms of depression, anxiety, burnouts number of health complications and even some research has shown that work-family conflict is such a potent stressor that it's related to mortality. So it really is a serious issue that needs to be confronted and having the governments and organizations really realize this. It's unfortunate that in the US the severe lack of supports in terms of policies and practices and resources for families that sets them up for this experience of work, family conflict and those consequences. It has not only consequences on the individual and their health, but there are ripple effects. It also affects the kids and how individual perform at work. So it's all interrelated.

**Covid highlighted the need for a people-centered work culture:** COVID put a brighter spotlight on the struggle between working and caring for loved ones. Especially as employers were trying to shuffle and figure out how can we still be productive and meet goals? While folks are at home and their kids are at home parents have to put on this additional hat or role as of being a school teacher. So really being confronted with that: here are the realities, how are we going to negotiate that? My hope is that these discussions and these experiences will show that there's not one model that fits for everyone. My hope is that they can see how these other ways or modes of working can be successful as well. I think the underlying message or theme is to be accommodating to individuals’ experiences and needs. It's more of having this people centered culture or approach versus this is how things have always been done, and this is how we need to continue to do.

**STAR (support, transform, achieve, results) is an evidence based program that can improve workplace culture:** STAR was created as a part of a huge collaboration of epidemiologists, sociologists, psychologists, demographers throughout the US to create workplace culture change. And part of this is eradicating this idea that that face time is so critical and an indicator of commitment to the job. Part of this culture change is talking with managers, employees about what assumptions or expectations that they have. Two essential components of this STAR intervention, which was designed to specifically reduce work family conflict included supervisor training as well as increasing employee schedule control. Giving employees control over when they work it's just so critical and there's plenty of research that shows how beneficial that can be in in many ways.

**In addition to supervisor training there were ongoing behavioral supports:** There's research that shows general supervisor support is important for employees’ satisfaction and performance, but there are also family supportive supervisory behaviors. They had computer-based training for supervisors to understand the reality of work family conflicts and how critical supervisors are in supporting their employees, which can benefit the employees, even their families, as well as the organization. And then after that computer-based training they used a tracking system making it a habit or routine to, for example ask an employee, how they're doing or how was their kids track meet showing that they genuinely care about the employee and recognizing their life outside of work. Another behavior that supervisors can track is are they modeling staying at work until 9:00 PM and then coming back super early and not spending time with family or not giving time for self care.

**Focusing on behaviors after training is so important:** The STAR training focused on the behaviors. And I think that's part of the problem with training. If it's just focusing on awareness and not focusing on the behaviors you have to change and how you actually can change them. We're seeing that from DEI training that it can be harmful because it's not changing the behaviors and people think they've invested in the right thing and that they no longer have to invest effort in it and that's not true. People can think about what are the behaviors I'm trying to change? Name them, focus on them and track them.

**The US government and culture make work-family conflict worse**: The US is at the very bottom among 41 countries with zero paid leave and even paid sick leave is not guaranteed. Other countries have paid leave, beyond a few weeks, even months and incentives so that fathers also take leave which I think is so important in terms of creating gender equality with policies outside of the home, but also within the home. Supporting that equal share raising the child, taking care of the new newborn, I think is so important. The individualistic culture of do it on your own and the government shouldn't be involved or provide support creates tension and leaves employees, individuals to try to figure it out on their own. It shouldn't be just left to the individual because the individual only has so much power and so many resources accessible to them. It’s a multi-level problem.

**Making paternity leave the default can help:** There are countries where they're actually making paternity leave the default so basically then everybody takes it. There's no question about whether you take it. There's no judgment. It's just what you do. You then have to actively opt out of it. That's what we see in many behavior change science fields; if you make the behavior you want as the default then it really helps shape the behavior and the culture and the social norm.

**Even if there are good policies supervisors need to actively promote them:** There could be these policies or practices on the books, like HR policies. But just because they're there doesn't mean that employees or even supervisors are aware of them. I've run into that in my research where the supervisors just don't know what these policies are that could support their employees and their life outside of work. But also the very real concern that it's not safe to use those policies to take time off, not wanting to do anything to risk losing their job. Women especially are at risk here because there is this ideal worker norm that Joan Williams talks about; being ever present at your desk, committed to work late, won’t take time off which is unrealistic for anyone, but particularly for women who continue to shoulder the caregiving demands. And so then often supervisors will not see them as committed.

**Companies should make a real commitment to invest in supervisor training:** So often I've heard employees talking about how wonderful their supervisor was and being so supportive and flexible and how that made a difference in their lives and their family lives which helped them be a better employee and produce better work. And then also the very heart wrenching stories of how an individual is seen as an employee and not a whole individual with experiences and needs that aren't just focused on the job. So I think if there's one thing to prioritize, I would say it would be organizations investment in supervisor training their knowledge of policies but also just how to be supportive of life outside of work and recognizing that behavior helps an employee feel a sense of belonging and feeling seen and heard. And that is so critical for an employee to be satisfied and do well in their job. There is a return on investment for organizations in terms of having a more holistic or person centered approach to their organization.

**Parents can be more compassionate managers as they understand the struggle: R**esearch shows that when supervisors or managers or our mentors have children they're more understanding and supportive of their employees tying to manage these work and family responsibilities and, and minimize that conflict. Being able to understand that experience and do it, actually have the experience of trying to juggle all these things helps you be more compassionate and understanding and supportive of your employees.

**Seek work-life integration not balance:** The term work-life balance is misleading: balance isn't achieved in equal parts every day. It sets up this false dichotomy because you have different values that you place on work and family and different amounts of time and effort in these two spheres. These aren't just two things that can be balanced and in harmony. Instead we should use terms like work life integration or work-life fit, which promote fitting responsibilities together, depending on different situations. How can you make it all fit together so that pieces line up as best as possible to promote your health and wellbeing.

**Being a single mom can make you want to prove yourself more:** That's one of the challenges that I've had as a single mom is that I feel this pressure to prove I can do it all, whatever this nebulous do at all is. And for me as a single mom, I want to prove even more I don't need to have a husband, I can do this. So for me, in my experience, I think I put even more pressure on myself to just prove to myself and others. I needed to sort of humble myself as well as not be as stubborn and reach out for help. Because there are certainly times where I just became very burnt out and wondering if I can really accomplish this goal that I had set out for myself and to, to benefit my kids. So it, it's definitely challenging and still to this day just being able to ask for help and not feeling guilty or like a failure, it's still something I struggle with.

**When we are with our kids, we need to be present:** On the one hand, technology could help in terms of you can be at a soccer game and you can respond to an email. But on the other hand, there's this expectation that you are available around the clock and therefore making it difficult for parents to be able to separate those two things and be able to really be fully present. I have to actively separate the two and that may mean putting my phone away and actually the girls and I, we have = regular evening walks and we implement the rule of everyone putting their phones away. And so it's this intentional act of we're going to remove distractions so that we can be psychologically present. But sometimes I do need to take a moment to do something. So I say that to my daughter, could you give me a moment to respond to this so that I can get it done and then I can then pay full attention to you. Let me focus, let me get it done quickly. Explaining why the work responsibility or task needs to be attended to right now if there’s a deadline.

**Prioritizing time to reset can help**: I think setting aside time for self care to go for a run or relax and listen to music. We do have time even if it's just 10 minutes to re-energize and reflect and put things in perspective instead of being constantly on the go; just pausing and reflecting. Mom guilt is a real thing. And so I try to remind myself that self care is also helping me care for my kids because the healthy, happy mom and not a burnt out mom is going to be a better mother to their kids.