

En-ABLE'ing employees: Improving employee health through the Achieving Balance in Life & Employment program

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Why should we care about work-life balance and job stress?

Approximately 60 per cent of Canadians experience conflict between their work and family lives, with 25 per cent of them reporting high levels of conflict. In Nova Scotia, 50 per cent of workers report work-life conflict, more than 60 per cent report having high workload, and about 15 per cent report high levels of stress.

We have known for years that conflict and stress are bad—not only for employees, but also for their families, workplaces and communities. For example, we know there are substantial people costs of conflict and stress, ranging from minor health problems (e.g.: having difficulty sleeping) to more major health issues (e.g.: coronary heart disease). In fact, job stress has been identified as one of the leading causes of workplace death. Stress and conflict at work can affect one's family by reducing life satisfaction. Finally, the financial impact is staggering: work-life conflict and job stress are estimated to cost organizations in Canada between six and \$12 billion each year.

We also have a fairly good understanding about what creates this conflict and stress. For example, we know that having too much to do at work and at home, having unsupportive or abusive supervisors, and not having control over your work are all associated with increased conflict and stress.

What we don't really know, however, is what to do about it because few formal studies have developed and demonstrated the effectiveness of programs in this area. Therefore, we developed and tested a program to help employees balance their work and life responsibilities and manage job stress: the ABLE (Achieving Balance in Life and Employment) program.

What is the ABLE Program?

The ABLE program is a 12-week phone-based coaching program based on a solid research foundation. Employees talk to a personal coach on a weekly basis to discuss their own set of work and life demands, set personal goals, identify and increase individual resources and identify barriers to achieving their goals. The coaches guide employees through various topics pertaining to balance and stress reduction. The individualized coaching method of the ABLE program allows the focus to remain on the individual demands of the employee and on unique, personalized solutions.

ABLE coaches touch on topics that reduce stress in three different ways: (1) Identifying and utilizing resources (e.g.: goal

setting, time management, social support); (2) Changing perceptions (e.g.: positive thinking); and (3) Utilizing positive coping strategies.

The specific strategies vary. However, all participants address similar questions while learning what works best for them. For example:

⇒ “What aspects of my life do I find stressful and what are my **priorities**?”

⇒ “How **am** I spending my time?” versus “How **should** I be spending my time?”

⇒ “How do I **currently** cope with stress?” versus “How can I **best cope** with this stressor?”

⇒ “What **resources** (e.g.: support from family, friends and work) are available to me, both at work and at home, and how can I use them to my advantage?”

⇒ “What **goals** do I want to accomplish as a result of the ABLE program, and what skills do I need to reach them?”

These questions, among others, guide a participant and their coach through the ABLE program. The program is novel and effective for several reasons:

- (a) it tailors to the needs of the individual (one-on-one coaching);
- (b) it is convenient and accessible (employees participate at a time and location that is convenient for them; all they need is access to a phone);
- (c) it is cost-effective.

The ABLE Study

We tested the ABLE program on 119 employees from 15 organizations in Nova Scotia. We compared employees enrolled in the program with those who weren't. The ABLE program had a positive impact: 95 per cent of participants found it beneficial and indicated that they would encourage others to take it. 88.65 per cent of participants reported making positive changes in their life in general, with 78 per cent of participants reporting having achieved their program goals. Interestingly, half of participants even had someone else comment on the positive changes they witnessed in the participant.

Participants tended to experience several positive outcomes. Some had increases in engagement, job satisfaction, and decreased strain. Others experienced decreases in burnout (in terms of cynicism and exhaustion), strain, and work-life conflict. The program also had a positive impact on absenteeism.

We also examined what people did after work to help them “recover” from their work day. The program helped participants positively detach from work, relax, spend more time in social activities, and feel more hopeful. The



program also helped the employees maintain their level of physical activity (the level of physical activity *decreased* in the comparison group). In turn, these activities helped reduce physical and psychological stress.

What can you do?

Based on the positive experiences of the ABLE program, there are several suggestions to increase work-life balance and reduce stress in your life. You can think about making **A Plan**:

A: Assess: How are you doing? What do you want to achieve? (for example, increasing general health, positive relationships, or relaxation or reducing unnecessary commitments, overtime hours, or negative coping).

P: Prioritize: Be realistic about how much you can do. We often over commit ourselves in all areas of our life, which can drain us. Identify your priorities.

L: Learn coping techniques: We all have our “go to” remedies for coping (drinking, eating comfort food, shopping), but are these actually helping? Sometimes, using these remedies often leads to other negative issues (decreased health, increased debt). Identifying positive coping strategies that deal directly with the situation can make you feel better in a healthy way (e.g.: talking with a friend).

A: Advocate (self): Remember to schedule in quality “me time” because we often forget about ourselves. Read a book, go for a walk, or treat yourself to something special.

N: iNnovate & be flexible: Identify your resources. There are things in your life that are already in place to help you achieve change, whether it be at home (supportive family), at work (Employee Assistance Programs; family-focused programs), or in other areas of your life (supportive friends and neighbours).

What can your organization do?

Although we may see stress and conflict as an individual's problem, organizations can have

a huge impact on the frequency and severity of stress and conflict, as well as on positive employee outcomes. Healthy workplace programs are effective in reducing stress and improving employee well-being and health. The struggle so far has been incorporating both organizational and individual components into a suitable employee-based program. The introduction and implementation of programs like ABLE may be the key to creating healthy employees.

Although we face many demands in our personal and work lives, the negative consequences of stress and conflict are not inevitable. The ABLE program results are very promising. By incorporating focuses on both the individual and the workplace, the ABLE program can be a model for organizations to help employees improve work-life balance and effectively manage stress.

The final part of the first initiative is being completed this winter, and ABLE program researchers are looking to start the second initiative in the spring. A list of interested employees (on an individual level) is being compiled and researchers are working with organizations to provide the program to them on a larger scale. If you'd like to find out more about this, please contact ABLE Program Manager and Coach Amy Morgan via email at amymorgan03@gmail.com or phone 902-491-6380.

Dr. Arla Day is a Canada Research Chair and professor at Saint Mary's University, and she is the lead researcher on the ABLE project. If you are interested in receiving more information about this or other related projects, or if you would like references for the statistics used in this article, please contact Dr. Day at the ABLE program office, 902-491-6380; able@smu.ca. The web address is www.smu.ca/able.

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The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at **Be_Well@nstu.ca**.

Please contact Erin at ekeefe@nstu.ca to provide her with your NSTU email address. The **Be_Well@nstu.ca** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

