



BJ Mann is a Family Mediator in private practice in Rochester who helps people reduce conflict and improve relationships.

## I am struggling to balance my job and two small kids and I need more help. How can I talk to my husband without it sounding like criticism?

For any family, juggling two small children and two jobs is a challenge. It is a time when many marriages are stretched pretty thin because both parents feel depleted, exhausted and undervalued. An unhealthy competition can emerge around who does more and who needs more help. It is essential to have a real conversation, because unresolved conflict can lead to resentments that can smother a relationship.

The first step is to arrange a time to have this conversation away from the stresses of the household, and to acknowledge that your husband is feeling stretched, too. Something like: "Bob, seems like we're both at our wits end about managing all the things we have to do and I would really like to spend some time trying to help each other." The worst request for a conversation would be in a moment of household chaos by shouting, "we have to do something about this!"

Once you are able to have the conversation, you could suggest that each of you share how you feel without interrupting each other. So often, people listen to each other to challenge and correct and

problem-solve what they have heard. Share how you feel – depleted and exhausted, for example – and what you need, such as more time alone or time to exercise or read. Avoid telling Bob what he should do. When people hear the word "should" or "ought," they hear criticism. Ask Bob what he heard you say and you may be surprised that he heard something quite different from what you intended.

When you both have shared and listened and clarified what's been said, then you'll have a good foundation for problem-solving and sharing solutions. You might even consider writing some of your agreed-upon "action steps" down on paper as a reference. But remember, too, that things always change, so new conversations will need to take place. You may actually find that you look forward to these quiet times away from the hubbub! Transforming firmly held positions, worries and anger into useful possibilities is the magic of working with each other rather than against each other. It's a communication style that works with kids and with co-workers, as well.

## Having the kids home from college for the holidays was so special. With so many tragedies both locally and afar claiming young kids' lives, I am a "nervous Nelly" about "letting go." Any advice for coping, without being too overbearing or intrusive?

Remember when your baby was born? You felt joy and excitement and then, almost simultaneously, your thoughts turned to protecting this precious bundle. Right then and there, you vowed to take care of her. Each time you dropped her off at day care or school or to stay at a friend's house overnight, you were aware of your silent plea, "let her be safe."

Over the years, we try to minimize our natural parental anxiety in order to instill the important combination of caution

and courage in our children. All those discussions at the kitchen table about strangers, drugs and values were your insurance policy to keep the kids safe. One way to 'renew the policy' is to continue those conversations in the context of current events and listen carefully to what your children share. Avoid teaching or preaching and let these young adults describe what they would do in certain situations.

It's wise to have a regular routine of connecting to your kids, whether by phone or e-mail. Just like when they were home, it helps to know who their friends are and what activities they are involved in. Stay connected by becoming acquainted with their new friends -invite them to bring friends home at school break and visit your children at college (but not too often!). Because worry is often rooted in not knowing, the more familiar you are with their surroundings and peers, the better you'll feel.

Your concerns are natural, because they reflect how much you care about your children. However, it is easy to get caught up in 'what-if's.' Your own question holds the key to the best coping strategy: the awareness of the special moments you have. Staying in the present and focusing on each precious moment avoids the worry of living in tomorrow. This much is certain: if bad things happen, the news will find you, so don't give it a head start by actively looking for it in your heart and mind.

**If you have a question on relationships, family or personal, please be sure to send BJ your question to**

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