

Employees keep home distractions at bay by using their working memory

March 28 2024, by Jared Wadley



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Are family challenges distracting you at work, making your job feel demanding and stressful?

You're not alone. But for people who use their working [memory](#), which helps them manage distractions, they can reduce the impact of family problems at work, according to a new study.

Research by Oscar Ybarra, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Michigan, and Google researcher Todd Chan highlights the role of working memory—an ability to hold and manipulate information simultaneously in one's mind—as it relates to [family life](#) affecting one's job performance.

In other words, when [intrusive thoughts](#) enter the mind, working memory is needed to keep track of the thoughts one should remain focused on, said Ybarra, who is now a professor at the University of Illinois.

"Thus, working memory is required to ensure that if distractions intrude, individuals can maintain focus amidst those distractions," he said.

Family life distractions could involve being responsive to a spouse or one's parents, caring for children, keeping up with cleaning or putting a meal together.

"The best many of us can hope for is to keep thoughts of family and home life at bay and out of mind so that we can focus on our work for a few hours," said Chan, a psychology doctoral graduate of U-M.

The researchers analyzed data from more than 2,500 people, who described their physical and psychological happenings at work and home. Study participants assessed job demands and resources, as well as disclosed problems with their spouse/partner, kids and parents in the last 12 months.

To determine their working memory, participants were presented with a

series of digits, one at a time, of increasing length/difficulty, and were asked to repeat them backward. Digits were presented starting with two-digit strings and they increased in length to a maximum of eight digits.

The study indicated that as people reported experiencing more family problems during the last year, the more they felt their job was demanding. This showed family problems seeping into their assessment of work, Ybarra said.

Individuals with lower working memory reported increasing job demands with more family problems, the study showed. This relationship does not hold for individuals with high working memory because they had an increased ability to prevent the stresses of the family domain from acting as a [distraction](#) to their work.

When there are few family problems, there is little need to utilize working memory, Ybarra said. This does not suggest that individuals with higher working memory experience fewer family problems—they're just better able to fend off those distractions.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Community, Work & Family*.

More information: Oscar Ybarra et al, What happens at home stays at home: the Vegas rule for work depends on working memory, *Community, Work & Family* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2024.2333872](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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