



Perspective/Opinion

To the parents of untraditional families: I see you

By Stephanie Kellogg, PhD

Being a parent in any family structure has its rewards and challenges. Those who lead untraditional families have unique struggles to navigate and unique attributes to offer teams. In this piece, I want to provide a voice to the struggles and paint a picture for opportunities.

For most, having an untraditional family was not part of the plan. Yet that is where their path took them. A two-parent household with healthy, biological children and maybe a pet or two is no longer a reality. Getting to this point often included indescribable heartbreak and grief. Moving to acceptance and peace can bring a greater sense of purpose to one's life. But what does it take to get there, especially when you identify as a parent and a professional?

For those who have not experienced being a parent while your family structure is torn apart, I'll share a little from my experience, which is both traditional with a biological child, and untraditional with the addition of my teenage nephew after the unexpected death of my sister-in-law. The grief, uncertainty, guilt, and shame that creep up when life tears your family structure apart is difficult to describe. Not only do you have to navigate the situation for yourself, but you also strive to provide "the right" support for your child/children. Even if you accept that a family change is needed or is out of your control, you still wrestle with the uncertainty of a future you didn't plan and with the ups and downs of everyone in your family as they adjust to the new "normal." Further, navigating the legal system may put additional pressure on your time, finances, and emotions.

Layer these challenges on top of the professional demands we experience in research and medicine, and I hope you can see the hurdles parents in these situations face. For me, support, space, and time were keys to healing and adjusting. However, this conflicted with the professional growth mindset that we put so much emphasis on. Well-intentioned programs such as EMERGE and performance reviews suddenly became justification for me to quit my job rather than inspiration to grow. I felt guilt for not being the team member I used to be, uncertain in what I could contribute professionally, and a dramatic shift in my priorities that did not include professional or business metrics. I felt isolated and useless as a professional, and I could only hope that I would reach a new "normal" that would allow me to return to a more balanced and fulfilling way of living.

Many people going through tough family transitions live this way for an extended period. It can be a dark, lonely, and uncertain place to be. It's interesting though, how new light can be found

in such dark places. For me, things started to turn around when I engaged with professionals and community support groups who were experienced in helping people with the pain I was feeling. Being vulnerable around others gave me momentum toward healing, and labeling my pain and grief for what it was helped me turn my guilt and uncertainty into purpose. The chance to rebuild myself during these turbulent times was a blessing in disguise. I realized what I need to survive and eventually to thrive, and I don't take on more than that. In many ways, life is now simpler, and I focus on my true strengths and values with fewer internal conflicts.

However, plugging back into my professional role after this personal rebuilding has been a challenge. I feel like a different person than I was, and my new self has clearer priorities and stiffer boundaries. I am currently transforming myself as a professional and again looking to turn uncertainty and doubts into purpose.

I gained a clearer understanding of myself by working with a strengths-based coach and am intentionally working to merge my natural talents with my expertise in research operations. The more I express my authentic self at work, the more connections I make with others who help me contribute and grow in my natural ways. I feel a new sense of belonging thanks to these professionals and am excited to continue to develop myself and contribute in new, creative ways.

If you find yourself in a similar situation after a shift in your personal life, I encourage you and your team to treasure your new contributions. Leading a family through tough changes and rebuilding yourself takes great courage, perseverance, patience, and compassion. These attributes hold teams together and can help them grow to excellence.

If your current position doesn't align with or doesn't value your current priorities and strengths, be creative in how you can combine your research and/or medical expertise with your gifts. There is no doubt that biomedical research, higher education, and medical practices need people like us, so don't quit until you are sure it's the right move for you.

Leaders, support your team members so they get through the tough times with a clearer sense of purpose, help them put that purpose to work on your team, and offer encouragement. Together, we can take the challenges and heartbreaks that come with tough life transitions and make stronger, more purposeful teams in research, education, and medicine.

The journey of life is full of unexpected twists and turns. Parents of all kinds have unique challenges and perspectives at work. I hope we can create a community for professional support during all types of life transitions, so we all come out stronger on the other side.

Stephanie Kellogg, PhD provides scientific and administrative support to the Department of Microbiology & Immunology. She thanks the professionals and community peers who helped provide stability, grace, and perspective during her time in pain.