

# Ahhhh...The Power of Guilt

By Rebecca Richards-Kortum, Ph.D.

Two and one-half years ago, I gave birth to my fourth child and first daughter, Katherine Marie. The morning she was born I cried, a mixture of happiness, exhaustion and fear that this new baby would push our family over the edge. My husband and I are both engineers — I am a professor of biomedical engineering and he works in the telecommunications industry. Holding my tiny daughter, I wanted desperately to believe that “I Could Have It All.”

More than two years later, I can not tell you how much I love my daughter. I am in the middle of an exciting career in research — developing new engineering technologies to improve women’s health, teaching bright students, and helping to create a brand new undergraduate major at the University of Texas in biomedical engineering. I have many friends with careers in industry, academic engineering and academic medicine who love their careers and have meaningful personal lives.

And I still truly believe you can have it all. You just can not get here without feeling guilty.

## The Gift that Keeps on Giving

One of the biggest concerns I had going into a faculty position was whether I could be a good teacher, researcher and have a family. I must admit that many days I feel like one of the least qualified people to talk about work/family balance, but I feel quite qualified to talk about guilt! My daughter started part-time daycare when she was six months old. While she was at day care she was very happy and I felt guilty at she didn’t miss me more. When she was at my office, I felt guilty about missing seminars and not being more productive. As the humorist Erma Bombeck once

said, “Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving.”

Since my first child was born eleven years ago, I have learned an important lesson about guilt: It can be harmful, but it can also be a helpful tool. You can use guilt productively to find the balance between work and family that is right for you.

## A Continual Quest

I believe that the right balance is a very individual thing. For me, it means working less than 50 hours per week and leaving evenings and weekends free for my family. For my friends in academic medicine, it means more work; for my friends who work part-time, it means less. But I believe that we all can use our feelings of guilt as a mental barometer to help find the right individual balance.

I think the issue of guilt can be quite different for men and women. In *Fear of Flying*, Erica Jong wrote, “Show me a woman who doesn’t feel guilt and I’ll show you a man.” Sometimes, as women, we let guilt push us too hard in ways that are quite counter-productive.

Years ago when my oldest children were one and three, I was invited to give Grand Rounds at the Food and Drug Administration. This was a huge opportunity for me professionally, and to make sure I was prepared I scheduled a practice talk at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, in front of some very important physician collaborators a week ahead.

The day before the practice talk I finished my elaborate and beautiful PowerPoint slides. This was in the old days before LCD projectors, and I had to use a film recorder to shoot the slides and then have them developed. I finished shooting the slides at 5 p.m. the night before, just in time to pick up my kids at daycare but

not in time to get the film developed. My husband was sick that night, so I took both kids out to get the film developed at the mall.

I hung out at the mall with my two toddlers waiting on the film; at 9 p.m. when the mall was closing the film still wasn’t done. My kids were getting tired and cranky but I begged the film guy to stay late and he did — only to develop a completely blank roll of film!

Still I pressed on. I took the kids home, put them to bed, went back to the lab, shot another roll, finished after midnight, and showed up first thing in the morning to get the new roll developed.

I changed my flight to Houston to the last possible time, made an undergraduate drive me to the airport, cut to the front of the ticket line, and made the flight with minutes to spare. I put my slides in the carousel on the plane, arrived in Houston on time, and gave a fabulous practice talk. No one in the audience had any idea what I had gone through to get there.

## Chaos vs. Control

I told this story to my girlfriend and she said, “No man could have done that.”

I told the story to my husband and he said, “No man would be stupid enough to do that.”

And I think they are both right. Guilt can help you find the right balance but it can also make you do crazy things. With this extreme experience in mind, I would like to offer *Richard’s Rule of Time Management* — You can’t work more than all the time. This is followed by *Kortum’s Corollary* — You can get a lot of laundry done at two a.m. while working on a proposal.

Making decisions about when you’ve reached the point of diminishing returns gets easier with experience. But when you are just

starting out, you don't have that experience. Erring too far on the other side can make you look like a slacker. Christina Gonzales, vice president and dean of graduate studies at University of California Davis, told me a story about the nuns in her Catholic high school. They used to tell the girls: "It is not enough to be good; you must also appear to be good." The nuns, of course, were talking about sexual matters and chaste behavior, but I believe this advice is especially important for women engineers at the beginning of their careers.

### What is a Young Woman To Do?

Based on my experiences and those of friends and colleagues, I offer the following considerations:

- ◆ Begin by choosing a supportive environment. There are supportive places to work and there

are awful places to work. Ask enough questions when you interview to find out as much as you can which type it is. Be especially certain to ask the women you interview with if they feel like it is a supportive environment for women.

- ◆ Get lots of advice from mentors and colleagues, especially at the beginning of your career.

- ◆ Support each other. When I am having a difficult day and I run into a colleague who has been through this before it helps so much. Remember that it is not only women who can offer this support.

- ◆ If you get married, choose well. A spouse who is supportive of your career is a tremendous source of energy. If you choose to have a family, you will need help. You can either marry that help or buy it.

- ◆ Set your boundaries and stick

to them. For me, work is a day-time thing.

- ◆ Remember that finding the right balance is a dynamic process. As you advance in responsibility or family demands increase, you will have to renegotiate. Use your guilt barometer to do it as productively as possible.

- ◆ Choose one thing that is personally important to you and make exceptions to give back to your community through that.

- ◆ Finally, choose a career path that you feel passionately about, where you feel your contributions can make a difference.

In my career, I've worked to develop new technologies to enable early detection of cancer. My research group has taken systems developed in our lab into the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center for clinical testing. We see firsthand the failures of early cancer detection, interacting with patients whose cancers were not detected until an advanced stage. The hope that our work could prevent this in the future is extremely motivating and certainly makes my struggles to achieve work/life balance all worthwhile.

Here's to the power of guilt! ■

*Rebecca Richards-Kortum, Ph.D., holds the Robert M. And Prudie Leibrock Endowed Professor In Engineering and the associate chair for research in the newly-formed biomedical engineering department at The University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Kortum is also a Distinguished Teaching Professor. After receiving a bachelor's in physics and mathematics from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1985, she continued her graduate work at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she received a master's in physics in 1987 and a doctorate in medical physics in 1990. That same year, she began her academic career at The University of Texas in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department as an Assistant Professor (1990), Associate Professor (1995) and Professor (1999). She was a founding member of the Department of Biomedical Engineering at the University of Texas in 2001.*

*She is married and has three sons, Alexander, Maxwell and Zachary, and one daughter, Katie.*

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The Department of Civil Engineering and Mechanics at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee invites applications for two tenure track faculty positions at the Assistant Professor level, but exceptional candidates at higher ranks will be considered.

**Water Resources Engineering:** The successful candidate will be expected to develop an externally funded research program and supervise MS and PhD students, to participate in undergraduate teaching of civil engineering and graduate teaching of water resources engineering, and to collaborate with faculty in the areas of water resources and environmental engineering. Preference will be given to applicants with expertise in the modeling of surface and subsurface hydrologic processes and systems, groundwater flow, hydrometeorology, operation of water resources systems under uncertainty, or water-quality modeling. A PhD degree in civil engineering, water resources, or a closely related field is required, and registration as a Professional Engineer is expected.

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