Being a working mom is not easy.

“We’re living in a time where we’re expected to do our jobs as if we don’t have children and to raise our children as if we don’t have jobs,” according to Katrina Alcorn.

The challenge of doing both was too much for her and resulted in a nervous breakdown. But she emerged from it and shared her story in her popular book, Maxed Out: American Moms on the Brink. She will share her story again – and offer her advice – at a special webinar.

No Longer “Maxed Out”

A nervous breakdown can be so debilitating, some find it difficult to ever return to work. But Katrina Alcorn’s nervous breakdown led to a new career.

It wasn’t easy. She was unable to work for a year, but then she began writing a book and it proved to be the catharsis she needed. Her book, Maxed Out: American Moms on the Brink, was well received and she started a consulting career, which gave her the flexibility to work and still take care of her family. Recently, she was recruited to a leadership position at a Fortune 500 company.

She will discuss her struggles and share her advice for balancing career and family responsibilities during, “Maxed Out: American Moms on the Brink,” a Special Webinar Series webinar to be held at 12:30 p.m. on June 2, 2015. To register, click here.

Ironically, Alcorn once again has a challenging job, while also being a mom. But working on her terms, she believes, will keep her from becoming “maxed out” again. Her children are older, too, so family responsibilities are less demanding.

“I am a better advocate for myself than I was before,” she says. “It’s not optional to take care of my needs. It’s a requirement. Even in the job interview process, I put it on the table. The thing about writing a book called Maxed Out is you can’t hide from yourself.”

Her new employer has given her the flexibility to work from home when necessary and she can set her own schedule, leaving at 4 p.m. to pick up her children. The flexibility benefits her, but it also benefits her employer, she says, because, as a result, she is “super loyal and motivated. I wish more managers understood that dynamic.”

Successful, But Stressed Out

The issue of work-life balance is not new, but thousands of other women found that they could relate to Alcorn’s story and what she had to say.
At 37, Alcorn seemed to have it all – she had a happy marriage, three healthy children (including two biological kids and a stepdaughter on the weekends) and a good job running a department for a website-developmen,t agency. Yet one day, on the way to Target to buy diapers, she had a “nervous breakdown,” which is a polite description of a mental collapse resulting from depression, stress, or anxiety. Alcorn believes it accurately describes what happened to her.

“I couldn’t think of a better description,” she says. “I felt like my nervous system had shorted out. My body wasn’t letting me sleep. I couldn’t talk myself out of my depression and anxiety.” After her initial breakdown, she experienced “weeks of panic attacks, insomnia and profound depression, followed by months of medication and therapy.”

She wondered how a person like herself, who had so much going right, could have a breakdown. Examining her life, she realized that she was “doing everything.” While she enjoyed her job and everyone was supportive, she was also recovering from the birth of a child and was not sleeping well.

In addition, it was 2008 and the economy was “in free fall,” she says. Because of the financial crisis, her clients were being difficult and demanding, adding to her stress.

After she quit her job, she began blogging and, based on comments from other working mothers, she found that many other people were having experiences similar to hers. In a survey she posted for working parents, 88% of the nearly 500 respondents said they suffered stress-related health problems, such as anxiety and depression, after having children and going back to work.

“The speed of work is accelerating, no one is at home taking care of a normal household, and technology keeps us connected all of the time,” Alcorn says.

A combination of medication, meditation, and behavioral therapy helped her recover, but writing her story also played a role in her recovery and was “a big part of making sense out of it.”

While her book was written as a working mom, she acknowledged that stress today has no gender boundaries—especially as men are contributing more at home. However, she adds, “A couple of things make the experience different for women. One of the big differences is cultural expectations are still very different for men and women. There’s still a lot of pressure on women to be perfect moms.”

She believes a big part of the problem is that our culture creates expectations of people that are difficult to meet.

“It’s not like you can say every disorder is a result of work-life stress,” she says, “but we’ve kind of put people in a pressure cooker in America.”

Three Steps to Stress Relief
She believes three steps are necessary to fix the problem, and that if these steps were taken, people would be healthier and more productive, and employers would benefit:

• Men need to share more responsibility at home.
• Employers need to update their workplace practices to conform to the “new social reality” of both parents working.
• Government policies need to be updated to reflect society today.

“It’s about making the workplace work for everyone,” according to Alcorn. “The typical job hasn’t changed that much since the ‘60s; employees are expected to travel at a moment’s notice. It’s all incompatible with family life.”

She adds that the number of hours people work, whether to get ahead at work or to meet the demands of their supervisors, leaves insufficient time for family life.

“There’s a ton of research around about what makes people productive and how much they should work,” Alcorn says. “When you’re working over 40 hours a week, productivity suffers. Usually, you have only four to six hours of peak working time a day. When you’re chronically overworking, it creates a negative cycle.”

She also believes government should play a larger role in mandating family friendly policies, such as paid parental leave.

In an essay for TIME, Alcorn wrote that, “We need more fathers to share the work of raising a family (which means, for many men, working less). We need employers to offer options like telecommuting, flexible scheduling and better part-time jobs to protect all workers from burning out. We need better government policies: things like paid sick leave and paid parental leave, something every developed country in the world except the U.S. offers its citizens. The bottom line is this: we have to stop making mothers choose between financial stability and their own health.”

While America is still maxed out, progress is being made at many companies. Some, like her current employer, make accommodations for working mothers. Others provide paid leave of telecommuting opportunities. While Alcorn has no immediate plans to write another book, she’s taking notes about the positive changes taking place.

If she does write another book, she says, “I would like it to be a really happy book.”

Click here to register for: Maxed Out
Tuesday, June 2, 12:30 to 1:30 p.m.