

Tips For Better Work-Life Balance

These days, work-life balance can seem like an impossible feat. Technology makes workers accessible around the clock. Fears of job loss incentivize longer hours. In fact, a whopping 94% of working professionals reported working more than 50 hours per week and nearly half said they worked more than 65 hours per week in a Harvard Business School survey. Experts agree: the compounding stress from the never-ending workday is damaging. It can hurt relationships, health and overall happiness.

Work-life balance means something different to every individual, but here health and career experts share tips to help you find the balance that's right for you.

1. Let go of perfectionism

A lot of overachievers develop perfectionist tendencies at a young age when demands on their time are limited to school, hobbies and maybe an after-school job. It's easier to maintain that perfectionist habit as a kid, but as you grow up, life gets more complicated. As you climb the ladder at work and as your family grows, your responsibilities mushroom. Perfectionism becomes out of reach, and if that habit is left unchecked, it can become destructive, says executive coach Marilyn Puder-York, PhD, who wrote *The Office Survival Guide*. The key to avoid burning out is to let go of perfectionism, says Puder-York. "As life gets more expanded it's very hard, both neurologically and psychologically, to keep that habit of perfection going," she says, adding that the healthier option is to strive not for perfection, but for excellence.

2. Unplug

From telecommuting to programs that make work easier, technology has helped our lives in many ways. But it has also created expectations of constant accessibility. The work day never seems to end. "There are times when you should just shut your phone off and enjoy the moment," says Robert Brooks, a professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and co-author of *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence and Personal Strength in Your Life*. Brooks says that phone notifications interrupt your off time and inject an undercurrent of stress in your system. So don't text at your kid's soccer game and don't send work emails while you're hanging out with family, Brooks advises. Make quality time true quality time. By not reacting to the updates from work, you will develop a stronger habit of resilience. "Resilient people feel a greater sense of control over their lives," says Brooks, while reactive people have less control and are more prone to stress.

English: An artist's depiction of the rat race in reference to the work and life balance. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rat_race Made with following images: <http://www.openclipart.org/detail/75385> <http://www.openclipart.org/detail/74137> (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

3. Exercise and meditate

Even when we're busy, we make time for the crucial things in life. We eat. We go to the bathroom. We sleep. And yet one of our most crucial needs - exercise - is often the first thing to go when our calendars fill up. Exercise is an effective stress reducer. It pumps feel-good endorphins through your body. It helps lift your mood and can even serve a one-two punch by also putting you in a meditative state, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Puder-York recommends dedicating a few chunks of time each week to self-care, whether it's exercise, yoga or meditation. And if you're really pressed for time, start small with deep breathing exercises during your commute, a quick five minute meditation session morning and night, or replacing drinking alcohol with a healthier form of stress reduction.

"When I talk about balance, not everything has to be the completion and achievement of a task, it also has to include self-care so that your body, mind and soul are being refreshed," says Puder-York.

These exercises require minor effort but offer major payoffs. Psychotherapist Bryan Robinson, who is also professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and author of the book *Chained to the Desk*, explains that our autonomic nervous system includes two branches: the sympathetic nervous system (our body's stress response) and the parasympathetic nervous system (our body's rest and digest response). "The key is to find something that you can build into your life that will activate your parasympathetic nervous system," says Robinson. Short, meditative exercises like deep breathing or grounding your senses in your present surroundings, are great places to start. The more you do these, the more you activate your parasympathetic nervous system, which "calms everything down, (and) not just in the moment," says Robinson. "Over time you start to notice that in your life, your parasympathetic nervous system will start to trump your sympathetic nervous system."

4. Limit time-wasting activities and people

First, identify what's most important in your life. This list will differ for everyone, so make sure it truly reflects your priorities, not someone else's. Next, draw firm boundaries so you can devote quality time to these high-priority people and activities.

From there, it will be easier to determine what needs to be trimmed from the schedule. If email or internet surfing sends you into a time-wasting spiral, establish rules to keep you on task. That may mean turning off email notifications and replying in batches during limited times each day. If you're mindlessly surfing Facebook or cat blogs when you should be getting work done, try using productivity software like Freedom, LeechBlock or RescueTime. And if you find your time being gobbled up by less constructive people, find ways to diplomatically limit these interactions. Cornered every morning by the office chatterbox? Politely excuse yourself. Drinks with the work gang the night before a busy, important day? Bow out and get a good night sleep. Focus on the people and activities that reward you the most.

To some, this may seem selfish. "But it isn't selfish," says Robinson. "It's that whole airplane metaphor. If you have a child, you put the oxygen mask on yourself first, not on the child." When it comes to being a good friend, spouse, parent or worker, "the better you are yourself, the better you are going to be in all those areas as well."

5. Change the structure of your life

Sometimes we fall into a rut and assume our habits are set in stone. Take a birds-eye view of your life and ask yourself: *What changes could make life easier?*

Puder-York remembers meeting with a senior executive woman who, for 20 years of her marriage, arranged dinner for her husband every night. But as the higher earner with the more demanding job, the trips to the grocery store and daily meal preparations were adding too much stress to her life. "My response to her was, "Maybe it's time to change the habit," recalls Puder-York. The executive worried her husband might be upset, but Puder-York insisted that, if she wanted to reduce stress, this structural change could accomplish just that.

So instead of trying to do it all, focus on activities you specialize in and value most. Delegate or outsource everything else. Delegating can be a win-win situation, says Stewart Freidman, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School and author of *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life*. Freidman recommends talking to the “key stakeholders” in different areas of your life, which could include employees or colleagues at work, a spouse or a partner in a community project. “Find out what you can do to let go in ways that benefit other people by giving them opportunities to grow,” he says. This will give them a chance to learn something new and free you up so you may devote attention to your higher priorities.

6. Start small. Build from there.

We’ve all been there: crash diets that fizzle out, New Year’s resolutions we forget by February. It’s the same with work-life balance when we take on too much too quickly, says Brooks. Many of his workaholic clients commit to drastic changes: cutting their hours from 80 hours a week to 40, bumping up their daily run from zero miles a day to five miles a day. It’s a recipe for failure, says Brooks. When one client, who was always absent from his family dinners, vowed to begin attending the meals nightly, Brooks urged him to start smaller. So he began with one evening a week. Eventually, he worked his way up to two to three dinners per week.

“If you’re trying to change a certain script in your life, start small and experience some success. Build from there,” says Brooks.

Deborah Jian Lee is a journalist, radio producer and author of a forthcoming book about progressive evangelicals (Beacon Press). Follow her @deborahjianlee. Visit her website www.deborahjianlee.com.

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