

Managing Work and Personal Life

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Regardless of what your personal life entails, you need to know how to balance your work and life demands. Everyone who works is subject to pressure from the workplace that can impinge on personal time. In an always-on world, people can easily become more attentive to their jobs than the other aspects of their lives; after all, work affords us the opportunity to provide for ourselves and others.

Work demands are somewhat easier to manage if there aren't a lot of people in your life who are affected by them, but even then, you're still entitled to a life outside of work. If you have a family or live with a partner, managing your household responsibilities requires as much focus as managing your responsibilities on the job. There are a lot of decisions to be made when it comes to chores, care giving, and budgeting. The suggestions below may help you devise a solid plan for household management. If they appeal to you, but require a shift in your work schedule or responsibilities, ask your boss or human resource department about your options—after becoming familiar with your workplace benefits, the availability of flexible scheduling, and your organization's attitude toward work-life balance. If you do your homework in advance, you'll be better prepared to discuss your needs and make suggestions that align with company policy.

If you are part of a couple, you'll reap the most benefits if you *both* think through the suggestions below. You will need to discuss them to create a mutually workable plan. Doing this should result in an improved work-life balance.

What You Need to Know

What's the first step to take in getting the right work-life balance?

Ask yourself, "Is my life in balance?" If not, plan ahead. Set aside some time with your partner and/or close friends. The first thing you need to do is establish a specific time that you will spend on yourself and those you care about. Consider what work-life balance will look like to you, given your particular circumstances. Though it is possible to be flexible, as in many areas of life, be sure you do not sacrifice the idea of carving out some time for a social life.

If I can't change the way things are would a career break help?

Absolutely. If you are stuck in a high stress job that consumes all your time so you are unable to enjoy a social life, think about taking a career break. Taking a career break and staying at home or returning to school or taking that long-postponed vacation is an option whether you're male or female—as

long as you can afford it. If you can take the time, it will be rejuvenating and allow you to return to (or create) a more balanced situation. Consider your alternatives. Maybe you are entitled to a sabbatical. Perhaps you have accumulated a significant amount of vacation time that you haven't yet taken, or maybe you can negotiate a period of time off without pay. If none of those options are possible, you can find another job with a better fit between its demands and a social life. That change could also allow you a transition period of, say, a month so you can sort out your needs.

What to Do

Weight the Pros and Cons of Your Current Job

Make a list of the benefits for both you and your family. Consider factors such as:

- pay
- friendships
- having a valued role at work
- making good progress in a career
- developing important skills and keeping them sharpened

Next, identify the disadvantages of the job. For example:

- the demand to be at work at least 40 hours per week
- the implicit understanding that you'll really work 60 hours per week; sometimes even more
- out of pocket payments for childcare
- stress on the job drains all your energy
- additional time socializing with clients after work hours
- extended night time and weekend job preparation is required
- commuting time and hassle
- additional formal job-related study is required for advancement

While you are thinking about your current job, also think more broadly about typical jobs in your field. Are they all the same? Most people will stay with the career they know, but if the demands outweigh the benefits, it could be time to consider other possibilities. There is nothing worse than feeling permanently trapped. Thinking about these issues may encourage you to reconsider your career so that you can find something more advantageous and enjoyable, with fewer constraints.

Weigh Your Personal Life

You may have many roles: friend, sibling, child, parent, partner, homemaker, and hobbyist, for example. Each comes with responsibilities and demands. What are the major burdens on your time, energy, and resources? Answer the question for different blocks of time. For example, what specific time in hours and minutes do you need for each role you play? What tasks are you asked to perform? It may be that you are asked to care for a family elder and specifically to have dinner with an uncle once a week. That takes time; say two hours a week. Once you see all the time demands made on you, you can determine which tasks can be delegated (to a spouse or child, for example), which can be discontinued (going to the racetrack with a distant acquaintance), or renegotiated (maybe dinner can be one hour a week). This helps manage your personal time in a way that both meets your responsibilities and allows you time for the more enjoyable activities.

Special circumstance: parenting

Clearly, raising children requires you to think very differently about work-life balance. If you are a single parent, the challenge is even more demanding; perhaps it is the most demanding situation possible. Indeed, kids change everything and you, (and hopefully a partner) must be there for your child—especially in the early years. Of course, if you have an extended family or can afford day care, that helps. If you don't have either, managing both your career and family responsibilities becomes very difficult; there are fewer options.

Determine the Compatibility of the Demands

You are now in a good position to see which demands are compatible with your needs. For example, you might need to be at home to pick up the children at 3 p.m. each day, but that is impossible because you can't leave work. Analyze your needs and demands against your constraints. Determine which demands can be accommodated and which need to be reduced or eliminated.

Make the demands on your time more compatible with your available energy and resources by sharing them, if possible, with family members or co-workers so they can be managed more advantageously. Be imaginative; for example, think about:

- asking an extended family member for help with the children
- asking a trusted peer parent to also take your child to school
- paying for childcare
- hiring a housekeeper to help with chores
- finding a babysitter and helper

Consider Changing Your Lifestyle

Rather than trying to manage a stressful job and family, consider delaying your career while you raise your child by taking a job with less stress and fewer demands, maybe one that allows more flexibility or includes more family oriented benefits. With a different lifestyle, you could think about taking a career break and staying home to meet family responsibilities if you and your partner can manage on one income. That would result in two major benefits:

- each of you will have clear and manageable responsibilities and won't be stretched too thin;
- you will share increased time and energy for looking after each other as well as your collective responsibilities.

What to Avoid

You Fail To Discuss the Impact of Your Stress with Your Organization

In general, employers are becoming more enlightened about the need to offer flexible hours and other concessions to dual career and single parent households. Your employer, however, may not be aware of what your specific needs are. Learn how to make your case without being belligerent and keep an attitude of finding a solution both you and your employer can live with. If your employer is unwilling to allow you to alter your schedule and no relief is possible, it may be time for a change of employer, lifestyle, or career.

You Want It All

Popular myth tells us it is possible for a dual career couple to raise their children and still live the exciting life. It may be possible, but it is very rare. The problem, however, is that many people believe it should be possible for them and hold this belief until the stress finally brings them down. It may be possible to have all you want if you are willing to accept the fact that it need not be all at once. Talk about this with your partner and figure out what makes most sense to both of you.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Johnson, Robert K., *Life Is Not Work, Work Is Not Life: Simple Reminders for Finding Balance in a 24/7 World*. Wildcat Canyon Press, 2001.

Malloy, Andrea, *Stop Living Your Job, Start Living Your Life: 85 Simple Strategies to Achieve Work/Life Balance*. Ulysses Press, 2005.

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