

5 Tips for Better Work-Life Balance

WebMD guides you through 5 practical steps toward better work-life balance.

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Figure Out What Really Matters to You in Life

Personal coach Laura Berman Fortgang, author of *NOW WHAT? 90 Days to a New Life Direction*, says getting your priorities clear is the first and most essential step toward achieving a well-balanced life. The important point here is to figure out what you want your priorities to be, not what you think they should be.

"I use an exercise for figuring out what matters most," Fortgang tells WebMD. She has her clients take a couple days off from work to contemplate the following series of questions:

1. If my life could focus on one thing and one thing only, what would that be?
2. If I could add a second thing, what would that be?
3. A third?
4. A fourth?
5. A fifth?

If you answer thoughtfully and honestly, the result will be a list of your top five priorities. Fortgang says a typical top-five list might include some of the following:

- Children
- Spouse
- Satisfying career
- Community service
- Religion/spirituality
- Health
- Sports
- Art
- Hobbies, such as gardening
- Adventure/travel

Ismael Al-Ramahi, a graduate student at Baylor College of Medicine, says his current priorities are his wife, his 4-month-old son, and his research. He tells WebMD the key is not only knowing your priorities, but devoting your full attention to just one priority at a time. "Split your time and your mind so that you're thinking about work when you're at work and you're paying attention to the baby when you're with him."

2. Drop Unnecessary Activities

By making a concrete list of what really matters to you, you may discover you're devoting too much time to activities that aren't a priority, and you can adjust your schedule accordingly. Since having a baby, Al-Ramahi says he and his wife have become much more efficient in managing their time -- cutting back on television, for example.

If at all possible, Fortgang recommends dropping any commitments and pursuits that don't make your top-five list, because "unnecessary activities keep you away from the things that matter to you."

3. Protect Your Private Time

You would probably think twice before skipping out on work, a parent-teacher conference, or a doctor's appointment. Your private time deserves the same respect. "Carve out hours that contribute to yourself and your relationship," says Stevan Hobfoll, PhD, distinguished professor of psychology at Kent State University, and co-author of *Work Won't Love You Back: The Dual Career Couple's Survival Guide*. Guard this personal time fervently and don't let work or other distractions intrude. "Stop checking email and cell phones so often," Hobfoll advises. "Few people are so important that they need their phones on at all times."

Protect Your Private Time continued... If work consistently interferes with your personal time, Hobfoll recommends discussing some adjustments with your boss. "There's a mythology in the workplace that more hours means more," he tells WebMD. Demonstrate that you can deliver the same or better results in fewer hours. Your job performance "should never be judged in terms of hours of input," Hobfoll says. Protecting your private time often leads to "greater satisfaction in both work life and personal life, greater productivity, and more creativity."

If you're your own boss, it's up to you to create boundaries that keep work from intruding on family time. Lachlan Brown is president of Tech for People, a small business consulting firm specializing in Internet marketing. "I make it very clear at the beginning of any new business relationship that if I work nights and/or weekends then this is purely by choice," he tells WebMD. "I've told clients more than once that if they call me at night or on the weekend that they shouldn't expect me to a) answer the phone and b) reply until the next business day."

Brown, who has a 9-month-old daughter, doesn't see his reluctance to work after hours as compromising his career but quite the opposite. "I believe that if I truly honor the different aspects of my life, such as work, play, and family, I will be more successful and fulfilled in each area. If I skimp on family time or 'me' time, then my success in my career will suffer as a result. I look to my daughter to remind me of how to be open-minded and excited and curious about life ... key ingredients for innovative, breakthrough thinking. If I don't spend time with her now, this opportunity will be lost forever."

4. Accept Help to Balance Your Life

Allow yourself to rely on your partner, family members, or friends -- anyone who can watch the kids or run an errand while you focus on other top priorities. "Try tag-teaming," Hobfoll suggests. "One spouse works out before dinner, one after dinner, while the other watches the kids."

To get more alone-time with your partner, accept babysitting offers from friends and family, or try arranging a regular trade-off with another couple. "I'll watch your kids this Saturday if you watch mine next Saturday." Tag-teaming is a great way to create extra free time," Hobfoll says.

5. Plan Fun and Relaxation

Fun and relaxation are an essential part of living a well-balanced life. That's why Brown makes time for weekly guitar lessons, a yoga class, a date night with his wife, and a guys' night out a couple times a month. In addition, he exercises on a trampoline in his backyard most days of the week. How does he squeeze in all this playtime while running his business and sharing the responsibilities of raising a daughter? "If you believe that the most important thing is to be happy in life (not when I'm a millionaire or when I retire but right now) then you can always make time."

Until you get into the habit of taking time for yourself, set aside space in your planner for relaxation and fun. Plan what you're going to do and make any necessary arrangements, such as childcare, to ensure you'll be able to keep your commitment. "Remember, you make time for what you want to make time for," Fortgang says. If something is important to you, don't brush it aside with a dismissive "I don't have time for that." You are in charge of your own schedule -- it's up to you to make time.