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Struggling with Juggling..... The whole work/life thing (again!)

Why Bother?

Is there any more that could be written on work/life balance that hasn't already been said? Probably not a lot and yet some of us need to hear things 9 times (according to McKinsey disciples) for things to sink in.

At worst the whole balancing act thing is just that – an act. We may appear to be coping but we're not and in any case, does it really matter? What is it that we are meant to be balancing? I thought I would give some thought (albeit provocatively) to a number of questions around work/life balance. They are:

- How might we define balance?
- Do we ever get there? Should we care?
- How do we know if we are unbalanced?
- And if we decide balance is a good thing and I guess I'm going to suggest it might be, then what
- are some strategies for achieving it?

Balance, I believe, like happiness, is a journey, not a destination; yet might balance include the same components for everyone? If you are one of the 30% of young Australian women (and many couples) who will decide not to have children, then you won't need to find time for "family" in the same way as someone with one or several children.

If you inherited millions, retired young or live exclusively off investment income, then physical hours at work, office politics, work/life balance are an irrelevance. So balance, while not necessarily elusive, will mean different things to different people.

You might decide that you want to find time to exercise. 1 hour a day might be great – but you may be involved in paid work for 50 hours a week and 10 hours a day – so have we achieved balance if we've addressed two important components of our life but not given them equal time – I think so. At least I hope so, because I still struggle to find the hour a day for exercise let alone the 10!!!

Tell Tale Signs of a Life Unbalanced

How might we know life is unbalanced? Do we care? Is it always our fault? A couple of notable symptoms of a lack of balance are *stress and guilt*. When I coach or train people who say they are struggling with juggling, some common clues about imbalance emerge. That strong feeling of disequilibrium comes about when they're:

1. not doing what they want to be doing when they want to be doing it e.g. working or flying when they wanted to be parenting; and
2. they may have gone to some lengths to plan for work/life balance and then life came along and trashed their plans!



What do people seem to want to balance – traditionally the holistic picture includes self, family, work, community, recreation, exercise, social and spiritual dimensions. The discourse on struggle with work/life balance usually centres around work and family so the short answer seems to be – hope to win Tattslotto or don't have one ...family, not tatts ticket. For many of us that's unacceptable or far too late (I have four children!)

Volunteerism we're told is on the wane. With everyone too busy trying to strike balance, who's got time to do anything for free? Recreation and exercise seem important because if we're unfit, ill or die too early, we can't keep tormenting ourselves about lack of balance in our lives. And what of spirituality? This is *Australia*. We are a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains. We are girt by sea and drunk by lunchtime and off on a long weekend if given half a chance.

Yet statistics on recovery from serious illness in those who live by a spiritual framework (whether mainstream religion or otherwise) are compelling. Often other dimensions are neglected because, we say, we're too busy working and yet depressing statistics about the mortality rate amongst recently retired men abound so work must be good for us. Let's work harder....huh? However If work gets in the way of the other dimensions, then work has to provide more than just an income or we should spend less time there. If work is meaningful and energising, then it shouldn't be a source of stress. Ask yourself: Does your work give you meaning? Does it nourish you? If it doesn't then you'd better have some really pragmatic reasons for being there and then be prepared to find other things that do nourish and satisfy you.

The Givens for Balance

The 3 L's - Leisure,laughter and "lexercise" are critical. Do you have the scope to flex based on other shifting priorities? Even if work is meaningful it can carry a lot of responsibility. Do you have someone to bounce off, adequate opportunity to off load when responsibility becomes burden. Can you sometimes say "Enough is Enough" and then act on that sentiment?

Ask people why they do volunteer, pro bono or charity work? One meets the occasional power tripper but essentially it's because that type of enterprise makes us feel good and allows us to balance the material with the communal. Refusing to find the time is not only denying others of our talents and caring, but us of self-worth.

What about obligations at home? I have never read a headline that said someone died from changing too many beds or ironing too many business shirts. However frustration, resentment and a shaky identity borne out of inequitable distribution of unpaid work around the home are much more likely to cause problems. That is, it's not the work itself but how it makes us feel about ourselves and others. Therefore communication with important others and judicious outsourcing, if affordable, seem to be reasonable responses.

What Might be Some Other Strategies?

1. Reality test your irrational beliefs about the world and the people in it.

Do you suffer from perfection-itis? Ironically the more we talk about work/life balance the more we create the impression that balance is attainable and sustainable, that others are doing it, so what's wrong with us. More stress, more guilt. Is it the case that every time we invite someone over, there has to be a feast, that when we go out, our kids can never play up? I think we have to give ourselves permission to feel bad, resentful, tired and hurt sometimes and express these same emotions that we would not want people close to us to bottle up. We also have to learn, that we are not being bad parents, slack workers or uncommitted members of the community if we spend some time replenishing ourselves.

2. Recognise that the way we live our lives is mostly a matter of the choices we have made (at least in our lucky country).

At times the choice may seem to be the lesser of two evils but it is still a choice. We are more empowered when we recognise that we are charting our own destiny, and with all those pressures on us to be perfect, it's worth remembering that we, still do, for the most part, a pretty wonderful job. We will feel bad when bad things happen or we get it wrong but the trick is not to feel any worse than is necessary for any longer than is necessary. If the guilt and or the anxiety is debilitating then it's time to re-evaluate.

3. Live to your values; be authentic and focus on your personal best and not on what everyone else is doing.

4. Assert yourself about the things that are really important.

Don't bottle things up that eat away at you and don't forego your own needs unreasonably all the time. Remember that asking for what you want, increases the chances of getting it!

5. Remember the 3 R's – leisure, laughter and lexercise.

And if exercise isn't fun find some that is or do it anyway

6. Get a coach, a mentor, a therapist, anyone qualified!

To strike equilibrium, we need to know ourselves and why we do what we do (particularly when it comes to counterproductive or self-defeating behaviours).

7. Let's remember to count our blessings.

Let's not wait for tragedy to realize how lucky we *were*. The anniversary of September 11 is a timely reminder. What would many of us say we want - "World Peace". However that may take a little longer so perhaps while we're waiting or even better doing something about that, we can work on our own "Inner Peace".



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