



## Adjusting balance

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Over the past number of years, as I have taken on new leadership roles and have had the opportunity to meet and mentor learners and junior colleagues, I am sometimes asked about my work-life balance. Years ago I used to say that I made time for myself and my partner to travel, I tried not to take work home with me, and I ensured that I had hobbies or activities in my down time.

I am not sure I really balanced work and life; I didn't have much "life stuff" to balance, to be honest—no kids, few community activities, my academic life was not as complex, nor was my practice.

Balancing also didn't really describe what I did—or what I do now as an academic family doctor and leader within my institution. *Balance* is a condition or state of being in which parts or elements are in equal and correct proportions. Because of this, balance in work and life means that you have to do less of one thing to do more of the other, weighing one against the other, or make time for life, self-care, or your family, despite work or instead of work. There are only so many hours in a day.

Years later I started to describe what I did as work-life integration, and that became the new phrase of the day. You don't balance one off of the other—you integrate them. What does this really mean though? To be more efficient and effective at work? Bring my kids to meetings? Listen to medical podcasts in the car or at the gym? Book holidays during conferences and attend sessions when my family is at Disneyland? That's not integrating, really. That's doubling up, and for me it doesn't give my brain the rest it needs. I'm sure other people have done this better than I have, but I struggle with this description.

Ensuring a healthy work-life balance also makes a bit of an assumption, to me anyway, that work is generally not good and that life is good. Ensure you have home life to balance the difficult work that you do. But what if you really like work? And what if home life isn't always good? We all go through things—personal or family illness, challenges with partners or kids, divorce, renovations, debt, and more. Work can be a lovely distraction, and if you have a great team, work is satisfying and enjoyable.

In October 2019, the Canadian Medical Association released a report on connecting behaviour and occupational stressors to psychological outcomes.<sup>1</sup> This report dived into some of the data collected from the 2017 National Physician Health Survey, specifically focusing

on occupational and behavioural variables linked to health and wellness indicators. It was reported that 62% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with work-life integration (so, more than one-third were dissatisfied!). Residents and women reported being less satisfied than physicians in practice and men, respectively. Those who had been in practice between 11 and 20 years were more likely to be dissatisfied; however, this improved as time in practice reached 30 or more years. There were many behavioural and occupational indicators that contributed to well-being or satisfaction, as expected (eg, physical activity, workplace location, specialty), and there were psychological outcomes that were affected by these indicators (career satisfaction affected burnout, emotional well-being, etc). I have been in practice between 20 and 30 years, and certainly my happiness with work-life balance has changed over the course of my career.

It has taken me some time to realize that my balance has less to do with time management and more to do with my personality. I am an introvert. I like to be alone. My preferred mode is in my home by myself, not talking to people. I find socialization and public speaking difficult. I like quiet and solitude. I am also very, very busy. I have 2 teenagers, I travel constantly, and I have a chaotic and demanding job. My life is people and more people.

I don't need to balance work and life, per se. What has worked for me is balancing people time with alone time. I try to have effective and efficient work meetings and appointments with people—interactive and connected, relationship building. Same thing goes for home life. I love my time with friends and family and I work to have active, nurturing, and fun interactions. And at the same time, as an introvert, I ensure I have time for workplace solitude to write, catch up, and do deep thinking—completely alone. Sometimes that's in my home office after hours, and I'm good with that. In addition, I need solitude in my non-work time—I get this with travel (plane time with headphones is a luxury!), reading, swimming, painting, whatever. As long as I have enough time alone—either working or not—I'm balanced.

Obviously this doesn't work for everyone—maybe other introverts will relate; some won't. One thing that likely does resonate: family medicine is a wonderful, difficult, and demanding occupation; family doctors are great at flexibility, ambiguity, and complexity; and we need life and work balance to be at our best. 🌿

### Reference

1. *Physician health and wellness in Canada: connecting behaviours and occupational stressors to psychological outcomes*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Medical Association; 2019.

Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page 150.