

Life's Litmus Test: Finding Balance Between Work and Play

By Catherine Mollner, MA, LP

Midwest Center for Personal & Family Development

www.mentalhealthinc.com

Credit wireless Internet, mobile phones, or personal digital assistants (PDAs), but we really do work all of the time these days. Sure, we may not always be behind the desk, per se, but we are laboring away in some capacity. Our mind is on work and our body jumps into action with each beep, buzz or ping. The on-call, never-lose-site-of-the-workplace way of life can have a negative affect on every aspect of life.

Granted, in this day and age it's hard to flip the switch to the off position. In fact, many have uttered the infamous statement when looking at a mountain of work: "I'm never going to be able to get all of this finished..." And now, with *advances* in technology many times we are expected - either by a boss or ourselves - to do more in less time.

Living To Work

The word stress is thrown around quite a bit these days. That doesn't take away from the fact that it's a scary premonition that can lead to a miserable existence. What exactly does it mean to be stressed? Well, we each have varying thresholds, but according to ol' Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary, it's defined as such: special weight, importance or significance; or emotional or intellectual strain or tension. A fair description but what is the difference between what we stress in our lives and life stressing us out?

Physical implications of stress include high blood pressure, gastrointestinal problems, fatigue, irritability, sleep problems, weakened immune system, headaches, chest pain, anxiety and depression. All of this can take a toll on life fulfillment and key relationships. While worker productivity benefits, quality of life suffers. According to Jerome F. Kiffer, M.A., 43 percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress and 75-90 percent of all doctor's visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.

So, as you read this you may be thinking to yourself, "Okay, this is me. I am reading about myself, but I've got no option to make any changes. It's just the way it is." That's just not true. You've got the power to change and live a healthier life. In fact, you've really got no choice but to make the change.

The Urgent Versus the Important

It's important to differentiate between what is urgent and what is important. In *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey explains that a sense of urgency comes from the outside - from environmental pressures and crises. A sense of importance comes from the inside - our own deep value system. Often times we don't get around to doing what is truly important, because we allow ourselves to become bogged down by the

urgent. In a way many of us are addicted to the urgent. We enjoy that adrenaline rush of living life in panic mode. Frantic. Always on a deadline.

We want to do everything - but we can't - so we set ourselves up for failure. Instead of looking at our aspirations realistically and scaling them down, we set impossible standards for ourselves. When we can't meet them – we are human after all – we feel as if we've failed. Like the story about two men in quicksand: One turns to the other and says, "You can stop worrying about the quicksand. Here comes a crocodile." The point being that the only thing that takes our mind off one stress is another. It's a vicious cycle.

As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, "Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least." This was stated years ago, but is still poignant today. Making the distinction between the truly important versus the unnecessarily urgent will lead to gratification.

Addressing Unrealistic Thought Patterns

We all have thought patterns, tendencies or intellectual filters that are automatic, and through which reality passes before we reach a conclusion. Some of these automatic thought patterns can become self-defeating if we don't evaluate our thoughts carefully. It puts much weight on our shoulders by saying things like, "There should not be any limits to what I can do," or "I have the capacity to help everyone," or "I am the only person available to help."

Many times we set impossible standards for ourselves. We want to be the most-involved volunteer, or the best mom or dad, or the most productive employee, or the owner of the cleanest, most beautiful house on the block. It's important to set limits, and accept realities. One impossible standard is total perfection. It's important to remember that no one is perfect.

Also, recognize that every "yes" means a "no" to something else. On a daily basis, though, we're not always conscious about the "no's." Be clear about the "no" involved in every "yes", and be sure that's the choice you want to make and that you'll feel good about it later.

8 Great Things To Put Your Life In Balance

1) Exercise four times a week: Maintain an elevated heart rate for 20 minutes. A brisk walk, for example, does the trick. Exercise is very important. Breaking a sweat and maintaining it for 20 minutes releases "feel-good" chemicals (serotonin and endorphins) into the brain and evokes a feeling of well-being. One recent study found that people who were very inactive were almost twice as likely as those who were physically active to become depressed. Exercise increases self-esteem too. It also physically discharges pent up frustration, anger and hostility.

2) As Sarah Ban Breathnach recommends in *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy*, take a couple of minutes to reflect upon that for which you are grateful. Don't forget what's important. Gratitude changes attitude. What is missing from many of our days is a true sense of life enjoyment. It is difficult to experience moments of happiness if we are not aware of what it is we genuinely love and appreciate. Savor the small, authentic moments that bring us contentment. As the song goes, "It's not having what you want, it's wanting what you have."

3) Replace 30 minutes a day of screen time (computer, PDA, or television) with face-to-face interaction with your loved ones. There really is no substitute. A simple and small shift will bring big returns.

4) Figure out how much sleep you need to wake up feeling rested, and restructure your schedule to get it. When it comes to balance and relaxation, sleep is pivotal. And, sleep improves with exercise.

5) To get more bang for your buck when it comes to shut-eye, try increasing the amount of pre-midnight sleep. Consider it quality versus quantity. A small change can make a big difference.

6) Identify what is truly important and fulfilling to you, and integrate it into your life in a meaningful way. A little prioritization will go a long way.

7) Stop multi-tasking when interacting with your loved ones. If you are having a conversation with your spouse or children, put aside the newspaper, cell phone, PDA or laptop. Focus, it'll be worth it.

8) Identify sources of fun and laughter in your life, and engage in them on a daily basis. It may sound child-like, but fun and laughter are quite the remedy to stress and overwhelm.