



Finding the Right “Balance” for the Trainee

I am honored to serve as Editor-in-Chief of the *ACG Case Reports Journal* for the 2015-2016 academic year. For the inaugural perspective, we will explore a prevalent issue for trainees that is infrequently discussed: the elusive work-life balance.

Fellowship encompasses a complex chapter of our lives. We stand at the crossroads of impassioned career aspirations and growing responsibilities (relationships, parenthood, financial investments), while trying to maintain our personal well-being. If you ever feel overwhelmed during training, rest assured that you are not alone. Even more daunting is that the transition from trainee to faculty introduces multiple, unanticipated stressors and responsibilities, further challenging the balance between personal life and work life. It is thus imperative that, as trainees, we begin to understand which activities bring meaning to us and determine how to achieve our goals.

After speaking with mentors and observing those around me, it's apparent that dichotomous schools of thought exist surrounding the work–life balance paradigm. Some maintain a complete work–personal life separation, disconnecting from work responsibilities after hours and over the weekends. Others feel that this binary framework creates an artificial divide, pitting professional and personal against each other, and prefer to blur the work–personal lifelines. These dueling approaches are often a source of frustration for the trainee in pursuit of balanced success. Is tipping the balance towards work while sacrificing family time and personal well-being requisite to being a national thought leader or exceptional clinician? Does striving to create a balance and separation between work and personal life inevitably close the door to career advancement?

Interestingly, an emerging concept negates both notions and suggests that the very idea of “balance” may be the true source of conflict. Rather than juggling distinct realms of our life, should we focus on aligning our commitments and choices with our aspirations so they coexist and develop hand-in-hand? Work and life are connected, and both should be nurtured. This Zen-like philosophy sounds simplistic in theory, but this big-picture approach may empower each of us to invest in the most personally meaningful endeavors and shed the less gratifying tasks.

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Surely each individual's approach to the work–life quandary will vary, and simple solutions do not exist. However, these pearls of wisdom that I've collected from mentors and personal experiences, may prove helpful regardless of the path one embarks upon.

Tips for Finding Your “Right” Balance

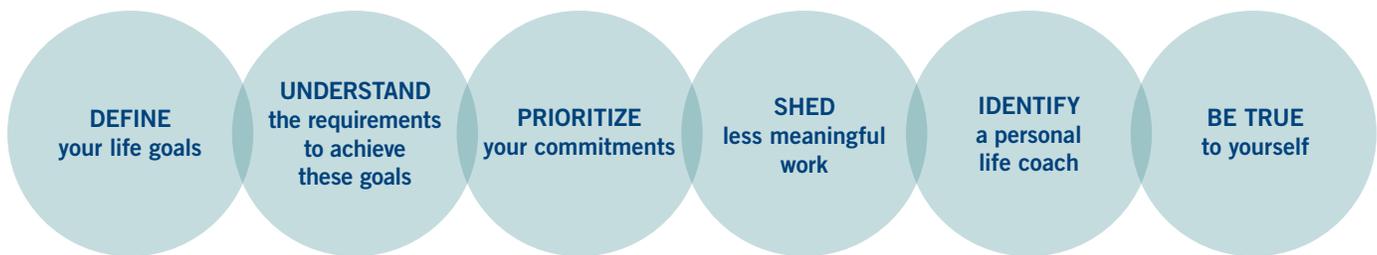
Identify your life goals. Reserve 15 minutes of your time to reflect on these questions:

- What is your greatest life goal?
- Who do you admire the most? Why?
- What brings you the greatest joy in life?
- How do you want to be remembered?
- Where are you most irreplaceable?
- What kind of person do you want to be when you grow up?

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You may read this and think, “I don’t have 15 minutes to sit back and reflect.” If so, I recommend reading an article written by Christina M. Surawicz, MD, MACG, on burn-out.¹ She advises that, “The degree to which you do not believe you have time to spend even 10 minutes sitting quietly is the degree to which you desperately need to spend 10 minutes sitting quietly.”

Map out the steps necessary to optimize personal balance and achieve meaning. A simple approach is to categorize your tasks on the basis of importance and feasibility. Visually plot your goals on a chart with the x-axis representing the level of importance and the y-axis representing the level of feasibility. Those that fall in the top right are your highest priorities, while those on the bottom left should be set aside for a rainy day. Silly as it may seem, this exercise will uncover what is sacred to you and what you are willing to sacrifice, and will help you come to terms with the fact that you cannot do it all.

Align your chosen commitments with your ultimate goals. Experts have identified control as integral to optimizing work–life balance. I think it is a matter of shifting control. You should not control all realms of your life—you cannot be the principal investigator of every study, micromanage the care of every patient, and be president of the parent-teacher association, and do it all well. However, it is critical to maintain control over your schedule, avoiding an inclination to over-commit.

Identify a life mentor. It’s important to have someone you can turn to for support and advice during this journey. While we all look to academic mentors and personal confidants, it is imperative to identify a “life mentor” you trust—someone whose sole concern is your well-being.

Rely on your intuition and set your own rules. Although it is difficult to escape the fast-paced, competitive culture that surrounds us, remember that what you deem to be personally meaningful does not need align with your co-fellow, spouse or mentor.

I realize that our main objective is not to achieve a balance between work and personal life, but rather to understand what is inherently important and align individual goals accordingly. In my humble opinion, this is a more reliable path to achieving personal meaning and success in life.

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¹ Am J Gastroenterol 2014; 109:511–514; doi:10.1038/ajg.2014.44; published online 18 March 2014. J. Edward Berk Distinguished Lecture: Avoiding Burnout: Finding Balance Between Work and Everything Else. A video of the lecture can be found at universe.gi.org/viewpress.asp?c=11167.

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