

month eleven

Reclaim Your Life: Strategies for Balance



Life is a marathon. You can have and be all the things you want to be. Just do it over a lifetime. Don't try to do them all at once, because you can't. If you try to, everyone around you will suffer—most of all, you.

—Eunice Kennedy Shriver, activist/philanthropist

*A*re you the master of your life or a slave to it?

Do you have enough time for those things in your life that are most important to you?

Ten years ago I was handling public/media relations for a large international biotech corporation. The culture was typical of most large companies: they expected long hours, work/life balance was never discussed and vacations were few and far between.

I had not had a vacation in two years when my girlfriend suggested we take a trip to Europe for two weeks. We were both single and I badly

needed a break, so I jumped at the chance. At the last minute she had to cancel, so I signed up for an adventure tour and headed to Amsterdam alone to meet my group.

Ten days into the trip, we stopped in Munich and visited Dachau, the Nazi concentration camp. The experience was chilling, to say the least. As I walked through the barracks, I picked up mental postcards that remain etched in my mind, even today.

After the walking tour, I left the group and walked outside with my journal, settling under a large shady tree to write. I asked myself, *what is one word that encapsulates my experience at the concentration camp?* I wrote the word down in my journal.

As I finished, the image of my boss and my job in Austin flashed through my mind. Suddenly my body was wracked with nausea and I became sick. Reeling from the intense experience, I sat, stunned. What in the world did my PR job in Austin have to do with Dachau, and why was this connection making me ill?

I slowly looked down at my journal to the page where I had been writing. In huge block letters was the word *OPPRESSION*. I had made a visceral connection between how the prisoners must have felt at Dachau and how my current job made me feel. (I recognize there is no way to compare the two on an intellectual level—this was just my emotional response.)

My gut feeling was really trying to tell me something.

A week later, while flying back from Paris to Austin, I heard an interview on National Public Radio with a woman named Carol Orsborn, author of *Inner Excellence: Spiritual Principles to Life-Driven Business*. The day I got home, I bought her book, stayed up all night reading it, went in to work the next day and (to the great surprise of my director) quit my job.



I ended up taking a three-month sabbatical, and it became crystal clear that the time had come for me to reclaim my life and my sense of balance. The experience at Dachau had forever changed the way I looked at and managed my life.

I receive many requests to lead work/life balance workshops for companies and organizations; not surprisingly, the topic of how to experience more balance in your life is more popular than ever.

I believe we're at a very unique time in history.

The convergence of many factors—the 9/11 tragedy, an unstable economy and job market, a 24/7 digital culture that suffers from information overload, the need to “parent our parents” while parenting our children, heightened levels of multi-tasking (to the point of ineffectiveness)—have created a society that feels off-balance, out of synch with its own rhythms and needs and completely and utterly overworked and overwhelmed.

Whether your work involves caring full-time for your children, managing your own business or going to a workplace every day, these converging factors have and will continue to affect us all in profound and numerous ways.

How can you begin to reclaim your life and experience more balance on a day-to-day basis?

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In my work with thousands of clients in the area of life balance, I have found it helpful to look at approaching and defining balance as having enough time, energy and resources for those things in life that are most important to you.



My approach to balanced living focuses on four core strategies *setting priorities and managing your energy, taking time for self-renewal, building a support network and being more present in your life.*

Picture yourself sitting comfortably on a beautiful, sea-blue, four-legged stool, which completely supports you in feeling more balance in your life. Each leg represents a different area, or strategy.

Here they are in a little more detail.

Strategies and Insights for Balanced Living

Know your top priorities and effectively manage your energy. What in life is most important to you? How good are you at managing your energy? What is draining you? What is fueling you? Are you comfortable saying no and not over-committing? Create a Top Life Priorities list and adhere to it! If it's not one of your top three priorities right now, it's going to have to wait.

Make your self-renewal a priority. By filling your cup first, you'll have more to give to family, work and creative projects and yourself! You'll be able to function at your optimum and set an example for healthy, balanced living for those around you. Self-care (on all levels—physical/mental/emotional/spiritual) is essential to balanced living.

Build a personal support system. What type of and how much personal and professional support do you need to feel nurtured, emotionally healthy and stress-free? Learn to ask for and receive help. Reevaluate your support needs every three months; these change based on your current life stage. Having a support system when going through a transition or stressful time can have a huge impact on how you experience the journey.

Be more present in all that you do. *(You'll explore this topic in greater detail in Month Twelve.)* Stress and overwhelm are often brought on by dwelling on the past or living in the future. By spending more time living in the present and focusing on what is most important here and now, you'll feel calmer and be more effective. In general, when we're living in



the present, we experience a greater sense of balance and well-being. One specific way to be more present is to be mindful of how and when we use technology (cell phones, computers, PDAs, email/Internet and telephones). These tools have the tendency to overwork us!

When making changes, it's good to start with baby steps and be gentle with yourself.

The good news is that the *Guide* has already helped you practice strengthening each of these areas (if they're new to you, go back and read Months Two, Three and Four on self-care, building a support system and managing your energy).

Most importantly, realize that you're in the driver's seat when it comes to how you manage your career and life (even though it may feel at times like you're in the back seat or even the trunk!). When making changes, it's good to start with baby steps and *be gentle with yourself*.

I've found the following insights to be comforting and helpful when it comes to thinking about experiencing more balance in my life. Use these tips to help support you on your journey towards reclaiming your life.

Tips for Experiencing Greater Balance In Your Life

- Live with (and accept) the way things are rather than the way you think they should be. This can be helpful in how you experience life on a day-to-day basis. If it takes an hour to get to work in the morning in traffic, that's how long it takes. If your child needs fifteen minutes to say good-bye to you in the morning, create a schedule that accommodates that.
- Realize that there are days or weeks when you'll feel like you have a handle on things and other times when it feels like you're flying by the seat of your pants—know that this is all part of the journey of motherhood. *Breathe.*
- Pause often to reflect and ask, *what's really important here?* This will help you keep a healthy perspective on life and the curve balls it regularly throws.



- Remember that each of us only has a finite amount of energy to work with. In general, try to under-schedule, under-commit and under-promise when it comes to obligations. When you throw children into the mix, things *always* take more time and more energy than you think they will.
- Maintain your self-care strategies, particularly during weeks or periods when you know you have an unusually hectic schedule. Make time for exercise, have healthy/easy food on hand, get plenty of sleep, schedule short periods of downtime and ask friends and family ahead of time for extra support during this busy time. Also, ask yourself, *is everything I have planned for this week really necessary? What can I take off of my to-do list? What can I say no to? What can wait?*
- Make sure you're scheduling and keeping regular dates with your partner. Time to rejuvenate and have fun is essential to maintaining your sanity and sense of humor when juggling all of life's activities.
- Consider setting a personal and/or family intention for the week (e.g., "This week our family is open to experiencing fun and joy in new and unexpected ways."). This affirmation can help guide and ground you before you ease into the week's activities.
- Live in the present as much as possible. Planning is great and helpful, but if you can balance this with thinking only about what you have to do in the next moment, hour, etc.—not what has to be done by Friday or by next month—you won't feel so overwhelmed.

A mentor often kindly and gently reminds me that each of us is doing the best we can at any given time. And when we know better, we'll do better.

Pause and reflect. Are you directing your time, energy and resources to those things in your life that are *most* important to you? If not, it's a good time to get some support and make some changes.





GUIDED JOURNALING EXERCISE

Enhancing Balance in Your Life

Schedule a twenty-minute break to further explore this topic. Have your journal nearby to record any additional ideas or thoughts that come up around this topic. Share your answers with a friend or with your partner.

Based on the insights on the previous pages, what are three specific things you need to do to create more balance in your life today?


(1)

(2)

(3)

Are you clear on your Top Life Priorities (as outlined in chapter four)? Are you directing your energy and resources toward those areas?





What area of self-care (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) do you need to focus on over the next three months? What specific things do you need to do to make your self-care a priority?

Do you have a robust support team? If not, what areas need to be enhanced?

How present are you in your day-to-day life? Do you need to reevaluate and tweak your daily routine so that you're not in a constant state of "monkey mind?"

Finally, if you were to adopt one mantra to help you feel more calm, effective and relaxed on a regular basis, what would that be?



TAKE ACTION

Create a Vision Map

Note: *This is a great Personal Renewal Group activity*

As mothers, we're often in a constant state of *doing*. We forget that our attitude, perspective or intention behind how we accomplish tasks have a huge impact on our day-to-day life. Plan an evening date with a girlfriend. Gather some old magazines, scissors, tape and a large sheet of paper. Put on some relaxing, upbeat music. Create a vision map of how you want to *be* in the world. Start by coming up with a list of five to six adjectives (or more) that describe how you want to be, and choose photographs, drawings or images from magazines or postcards that represent these qualities for you. For example, some women might choose adjectives such as wise, compassionate, patient, trusting, assertive, open-minded, etc. When I chose "trusting" as how I want to be, I used a photo of a woman dressed in white standing at the edge of a cliff. Choose images that resonate with **you**, and when you're done tape up your collage somewhere that you can see it as a regular reminder of your intention for *how* you will approach what you do. This is a great exercise to remind us that *being* is just as important as *doing*.



SELF-RENEWAL TIP FOR THE MONTH

Get off the Hamster Wheel!

Most of us don't enjoy the feeling of rushing from one thing to the next. What a treat it is to arrive somewhere early and have a few minutes to read or just relax! For the next month, try padding your schedule with a little extra time so you're not rushing to doctor's appointments, meetings, friends' houses, parties or the sitter/day care. Since having a child, I've found one way to reduce stress for our family is to overestimate the amount of time it will take to get somewhere. Often, when I mark down an appointment on my calendar, I'll make a mental note of what time we need to leave the house in order to travel and arrive at our destination with time to spare. It's amazing how nurturing an extra ten minutes of breathing space can feel and how it can impact your day, how you parent and how you interact with others. After doing this for a while, you start to make it a habit and the rushing (although it's bound to still happen occasionally) becomes a less-frequent occurrence.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Finding Your Own North Star: Claiming the Life You Were Meant to Live, by Martha Beck (www.marthabeck.com)

Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life, by Gregg Michael Levoy

How to Find the Work You Love, by Laurence G. Boldt

The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life, by Laurie Beth Jones

Life's Work: Confessions of an Unbalanced Mom, by Lisa Belkin

Living Your Best Life: Ten Strategies for Getting from Where You Are to Where You're Meant to Be, by Laura Berman Fortgang





THE POWER OF SELF-CARE

I learned that caring for yourself is not selfish, but rather a necessity of being a good friend, wife, mother and employee. I have much more to give the people in my life when I feel more in balance, rested and healthy. This requirement changes shape depending on the moment—it could mean taking time for a yoga class, going to dinner with girlfriends or taking a nap (instead of doing laundry) on the weekends. I am a recovering perfectionist and have learned that I can't do everything perfectly all of the time. I've become much more comfortable with the concept of focusing my time and energy so that one area of my life gets a lower or higher percentage of attention that week, day or even hour. It can't be split up evenly all of the time. And, it's your contribution over time, as a mother, wife, friend, employee, etc., that counts—one hour does not define your overall performance. My stress level and our family dynamic have improved infinitely as a result of my shifts in how I think, and this is the best gift I could have ever imagined.

—Tonja, mom to Annabelle, four, and Parker, twenty-one months



One of the biggest benefits I've received from my PRG experience has been the reminder to be gentle with myself and to pay close attention to how I manage my energy, as opposed to just managing my time. When I take a moment to step back and truly reflect on my schedule and what it will mean in terms of an energy commitment, I can pinpoint areas of my life that drain me or add too much stress. Shortly after I started PRG, my husband began to travel frequently for work. With the tools I'd been practicing from PRG, I was able to manage my time and energy while I was solo parenting in a way that kept me from becoming completely overwhelmed by the task of caring for our two kids, running my home-based business and taking care of myself. I worked breaks into my schedule, like lunches with girlfriends, while my husband was out of town. I made sure I had support lined up in the way of sitters and playdates, so I would actually have a chance for much-needed adult conversation! I tried to keep my schedule as light as possible during those weeks he was gone, and I really thought about how/where I was using my energy. As a result of my wise choices, I didn't get (as) frustrated or angry with the kids during challenging moments, I felt less resentment toward my husband's job and travel schedule and I was able to keep our lives running smoother and more in balance.

—Rachel, mom to Anna Kate, five, and Ben, two

