

Work Life Integration : Part I—Not So Secret Secrets to Managing Your Personal Life and Career

December 6, 2016

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Increasingly, many psychologists live in a world where their work and personal life have blurring boundaries. The reasons for this are multiple: women now make up more than 70% of those entering the profession and traditionally have had an increased focus on balancing their personal time and professional life. Technological advances make us more accessible for work from home, whether it is checking your email from your smart phone or being able to finish your charting from home with remote access. Generationally, early career psychologists and millennials may have a stronger value for flexibility at work to allow for personal tasks. Whatever the reason, achieving a healthy integration of your personal life and work life is important for psychological health.

As a mid-career psychologist, mother of three, and APAPO CAPP leader, here are some of my not so secret secrets to managing that balance. After I started writing, I realized I had a lot to say about this and decided to make it a two part series. Since it's December, and my heaviest family duty month (three birthdays plus holidays!), I will focus on family first and then follow up in February with a focus on work. However, it's really impossible to separate the two, as a truly entwined system!

1. **It takes a village.** I have multiple helpers in my life that I need to thank every day. Without these folks, my household would sink into chaos. These include a husband who is truly a partner, my childcare provider of 12 years, my mother, in-laws, neighbors, housecleaner, and more. This network keeps me sane. I still tend to be the manager of the village which has its own stresses, but without asking for help it would be impossible.
2. **Consider part time.** Fully one third of the female staff at my hospital work part time. I worked .8 FTE for almost 10 years. The day off allowed me to have more time with my children and have more experiences with them. But make sure you truly are part time—someone is covering your clinic on the day off, and you aren't working from home. I returned to 1.0 FTE about two years ago after I realized that I was starting to put in more time from home without compensation, and the home experiences were becoming less rewarding (i.e., taxiing, cleaning, and appointments).
3. **Take a vacation.** In my workplace, I am privileged to have a healthy paid vacation allowance. However, there also happens to be a culture of not taking this vacation and productivity standards that do not take into account this time. I choose to take a healthy amount of vacation each year, including multiple days to attend school events or engage in advocacy activities that are important to me. I make sure I have coverage specified so I can actually relax (it helps to create a group of psychologists to cover for each other). I especially increased my vacation use when I returned to full time; at least one day per month is taken off just to spend with my kids.
4. **Limit the electronic connection to work.** When I go home, my pager and phone go next to my keys. If I am tempted to check my email in the evening, I tend to regret it. If you do choose to check email or finish notes from home, set aside a specific time and stick with it. My family enjoys my undivided attention that I give to my workplace during the day. This past summer, I actually went all of vacation (9 days!) without checking work email. It was painful, but the lesson learned—nothing important happened while I was away. Set the “out of office” message and actually relax.
5. **Organization, organization, organization!** My family has fairly strict routine: homework, dinner together, exercise/downtime, bath, bed. I literally go to bed almost every night at 10 PM and wake at 6 AM. I have a shared calendar with all of kids activities mapped out. I am the kind of person who plans meals for the week and cooks them all Sunday so they are ready to go. Maintaining these routines and planning cuts down on stress for everyone—we all know what to expect, and the healthy habits are part of the routine.
6. **Flexibility.** When your organization breaks down, make sure you don't. Sometimes things won't get done or you won't be able to be there. It's okay. Life still keeps running. Let it go.
7. **Set the limits.** Everyone needs a reason to leave work. It could be to get home to your childcare provider. I carpool with my husband, so I am responsible to pick him up at a reasonable time. It could

be to get to your pilates class or feed your dog. Whether you have a family or are single, you have home responsibilities that can help you separate from work.

8. **Have a “wind down” routine.** I have a long commute, which can be a curse but is also a blessing. It gives me time to decompress from my day of patients and transition to home. Because I carpool, it gives me time to connect with my husband, catch up on news, or listen to music, podcast or audio book. By the time I get home, I’m no longer a psychologist but my own person. I also usually change into workout clothes and take a few minutes alone to unwind before my evening.
9. **Have your own time.** Sometimes I feel like saying “I already gave at home AND the office.” My main stress management strategy is exercise. Having a time that I work out alone helps with my stress management, or just having a block of time to go shopping or get my haircut. I take walks and do a lot of reading (I’m not talking journals either). Sometimes I need to be not a psychologist and not a mom and not a wife.
10. **Educate your family about your career.** Helping my children to understand the importance of what I do and how my work is meaningful for me makes it easier for me to explain when I have a meeting or have to travel and miss an event. It also is important for my daughters in particular to understand that I am a leader and scientist, which helps them to build confidence and visualize a variety of career options.
11. **No guilt, ever.** Things are going to get missed, and you can’t be everything to everyone. Make your choices and stand by them. Review how things are going and make adjustments as you need to, but never look back and beat yourself up. When my third child is sick that week and I have a full day of responsibilities, I need to be okay with letting the childcare provider handle it. Of course I would like to be there, but it doesn’t always work out that way. Conversely, if I am sick or one of my kids really need me, I also try to let go of any guilt about cancelling clinic or meetings.
12. **Be present.** Your time is your most precious commodity. When you are with your kids or partner, it is important to make this time count and not be distracted by your email or thoughts about work. Really being mindful and taking time to genuinely connect makes that time more meaningful.

So I’m excited to finish this blog early this month so I can put into practice the above. I have a 6 year old birthday party this weekend (9 RSVPs out of 19 kids in the class so far, cross your fingers for me!). I have seven glorious days off in a row, one class holiday party, a hair appointment, 2 doctors’ appointments, a piano recital, 2 holiday music programs, my husband’s birthday & my own. I’m not traveling, I may or may not finish wrapping my holiday presents until the day before (Amazon boxes are festive, right?), and I probably will turn down any major invitation for the rest of the month. I laugh at the idea of “balancing” the above. But I do think I am managing in a way that makes me feel satisfied, and that’s about all I can ask for.