

LIFE IN A BALANCE

Several years ago I began to notice several clients presenting the same dilemma – “My life feels swallowed up by demands. I feel like everything is falling apart at work and at home – like there’s just not enough of me. I feel overwhelmed all of the time.” Since then this musing has extended well beyond IT executives and other professionals, and now is offered by medical professionals, working parents, stay at home parents, and overwhelmed high school, college and graduate students. For many, life is feeling dangerously out of balance and the solution seems as elusive as the subtle increase in cultural current.

Our shared experience in the 21st century involves increasing levels of uncertainty, change, choice, intensity and ambiguity. For many, life is spent sprinting on a spinning wheel whose pace keeps arbitrarily quickening. Fear and insecurity climb as a need to control *something* mounts. More than ever we need the wisdom and grace to chart a course in line with our hopes, values and priorities. A sense of security arises when intention is used to craft the aspects of life that are within reach.

For those seeking “Life in a Balance” recent qualitative research with dual income families revealed 10 factors that seem to make a succinct and lasting difference increasing the quality of life of all members, professionally and personally. Clients confused by endless options often ask us to help them identify the variables of work, personal and home life that make a lasting change. With this research, voices are added to their chorus and offer insight into factors, when tailored to fit, can provide a road map increasing quality of life.

Factor 1 – Value Relationships

Paramount to families seeking balance was their value of family and relationships. This shared ethic became the lens other choices were screened through. With intention applied, members proactively created opportunities for connection with family and friends. This included establishing rituals and routines that were carefully woven into the fabric of a week, month, and year. In my work with physicians and patients coping with end of life issues, it is *this value* that is most salient as an inventory of one’s life is taken.

Factor 2 – Value Time

A key factor for working parents is a commitment to remain aware of time. Research subjects described awareness of the sacredness of time and how quickly it passed. This

corporate value was upheld through shared strategies and decisions about how time was to be spent.

Factor 3 – Strive for Partnership and Equality

Satisfied with their ability to balance life's demands, partner's interviewed spoke of the benefit of a shared division of labor, decision making and interpersonal companionship. Egalitarian partnership was demonstrated by sharing input, process and outcome of decision making, as well as proactive appreciation and support of each other.

Gottman's research echoes this factor by stating that the sharing of power within a relationship is one of the seven essential principles of a strong relationship. In addition, another study revealed that egalitarian relationships enjoy higher levels of intimacy and satisfaction.

Factor 4 – Make Decisions Proactively

Vigilant efforts are made by 'balance seeking families' to maintain adequate control of life, decision making and pace. A clear sense of priorities creates a map which guides and advises. These families also maintain an ongoing big picture view by remaining conscious of choices and consequences. A sense of direction is guided by desired family outcomes. Periodic retrospective glances reveal whether they are living out of stated priorities and provide opportunity for adjustment.

Factor 5 – Take Pride in Dual Earning

Despite negative societal messages and media images insensitive to the lives of many working parents, research shows that these families are largely healthy and thriving.

Parents seeking balance know what research echoes; what seems to matter is:

- Parental attitudes about maternal employment
- Income that working brings to the family
- Parent's warmth and sensitivity to their children
- The quality of a parent's job
- The quality of childcare

Research reveals that a child's parental bond and influence is independent of a parent's working status – as is a child's assessment of parenting quality. Parent's embracing factor 7 feel confident in their ability to negotiate time between kids, work, chores and adult time. They are intimately aware that the benefits of working exceed the costs in crafting a family experience that is meaningful to all.

Factor 6 – Derive Meaning From Work

Quality of life and satisfaction in the pursuit of balance seems in part dependent on one's ability to find meaning and purpose in the work they do. Are gifts, talents, values, being utilized, recognized, incorporated? Is work in service of a personal mission or is life in service of work? These questions and others like it, can help a person clarify their desired work purpose. Satisfaction in one's career contribution provides a level of contentment that supports connections at home and quality of life.

Factor 7 – Maintain Work Boundaries

When seeking balance, be clear about what you value most and make *this* the lens all other factors are screened through. For example, when the quality of family life and relationships are of highest value then this becomes the lens for all career decisions. Choices and costs regarding time, effort, job, mobility and opportunity are screened through this lens before decisions are made. This allows people to better dictate the pace of their lives instead of career demands or opportunities. This intentional screening lens gives clarity and direction to the myriad of choices and options presented.

Factor 8 – Focus and Produce at Work

The inherent paradox to intentional boundary setting in the workplace, is the commitment to remain focused on efficient productivity while at work. Research revealed that family's who felt content with their ability to live in balance, spoke of their determined focus at work on "doing the job well and getting it done". This focus allowed them less guilt and more peace of mind when they left the office for the day.

Factor 9 – Live Simply

Under the demands of constant choices, families seeking balance, adopt high but realistic expectations and priorities. From this established clarity, activities that restrict family time are limited and scrutinized against stated and agreed upon family priorities. Also controlled are unnecessary and encumbering expenditures. This level of intentional living creates the opportunity to do that which best serves the goals of the family while leaving members less burdened by media marketing to do and have more.

Factor 10 - Prioritize Family Fun

Another critical way families seek balance is by maintaining an active focus on fun. Not only is time set aside and family decisions made regarding the definition of fun, but a value is held of the individual and relationship benefit of laughter and play. With research families, parental awareness of the possibility of spontaneous fun left them feeling more flexible to unexpected moments of silliness. Subject families also spoke of the pre-fun and cohesion that emerged in the planning and decision making around intended events. Within the desire to live with intention lies the paradox of flexibility. People cognizant of the importance of truly enjoying loved ones, find increased satisfaction, flexibility and joy.

These 10 factors, albeit derived from research with working parents, provide a place to begin adapting and evaluating how time and resources are spent. By mapping out priorities, setting steps, and monitoring choices, people can gain the ability to slow the spinning wheel. This added sense of clarity and choice not only empowers, but also soothes the exhausted soul.