



How to Balance Work and Family Life

By Krystal Culler, BA, Kellye S. Carver, MS, Elizabeth Hahn Rickenbach, PhD, and Julie Norstrand, MS, MSW

It just never seems like there are enough hours in the day! As student and transitional members of GSA, many of us are balancing the demands of an emerging career while also nurturing a developing relationship, planning a wedding, settling down, buying a house, or raising children. All of these things could be a full-time job, yet many of us balance all of these tasks each and every day. You know that person in your office or circle of friends who just seems to “do it all” and always has a smile on his or her face? This installment of ESPO News provides some advice received from friends, family, and colleagues over the years to help balance work and family life. Maybe one day we will be that person who can “do it all!”

Organization

This may seem like an obvious one, but organization is key! My sister manages two little ones and their endless number of activities, working, and taking care of the household, and she puts every little thing on the calendar. Her calendar tells her where and when she needs to be somewhere, whether she needs to bring money/drinks/snacks, what her work schedule consists of, what her family will have for dinner, and even whether she needs to thaw chicken a day ahead of time. This way she can focus her energy on more important things, like family, children, and work, rather than remembering whether or not she was supposed to bring juice boxes to the soccer game!

Priorities

A professor of mine has often said that when talking to students and postdocs who were new parents in our department, “it’s all about priorities.” These words of wisdom have stuck with me, and balancing family and school requires organized priorities, effective time management, and communication. Priorities may change based on deadlines or personal goals. So it is important to decide when you’ll take care of these tasks or relationships, and schedule your time accordingly. Regularly discuss with your partner your needs, his/her needs, and your relationship’s needs, and either review priorities or revise schedules to ensure each area gets appropriate attention. It might also be helpful to work together to set boundaries (e.g., no school discussions on date nights) and to schedule activities that maintain closeness in your relationship.

Relationships and Social Support

“Graduate school is not a time to make or break personal relationships” were words of advice ESPO member Krystal Culler received from a mentor upon entering graduate school. As a student with limited financial resources, we need to utilize the support available from our program and department peers as well as faculty, family, and friends. Taking the initiative to nurture relationships that are professionally rewarding within our department can help us to develop opportunities for success in our careers, and personal relationships can provide emotional and social support in times of need.

Avoiding Guilt

When children enter the family dynamic, the number one question you may ask yourself is, “How can I manage the 100 things I need to do today?” Multi-tasking can be very helpful. However, at the end of the day, you are only one person and there are only 24 hours in the day, so avoid feelings of guilt when you can’t do it all. In the article “The Top 10 Tips for Balancing Work and Family Life” by Natalie A. Gahmann, the author describes “guilt as one of the greatest wastes of emotional energy.” You just do what you can, each and every day. You need your partner’s full support and willingness to step in, such as when papers or a grant is due. Make sure you get time to recuperate from strenuous work and family activities, like pulling an all-nighter when your kid is sick. And don’t be too hard on yourself when you can’t participate in all the extracurricular events going on at your school because instead you have to devote your attention to the little one(s)!

Being Present

Being present and in the moment is an important one we often forget. When you are at work, be focused on your work, and when you are at your daughter’s gymnastics recital, enjoy watching her! In short, when you are doing something, let yourself focus your energies on that task rather than thinking about the other things you have to do later today or tomorrow. Someone who is working on both developing a career and a family at the same time should spend the time to enjoy and “be in the moment” for these important and rewarding life events.

Personal Breaks

After you have managed to do all that you can during the day, give yourself at least a few minutes of “me” time each day. Try to plan ahead to allow yourself time for weekly, if not daily, uplifts and activities that you enjoy, whether it is cooking dinner, watching a weekly television show, reading a book for 10 minutes before bed, walking your dog, or working out in the morning before work.