

Advice on Balancing Family and Career

By Andrew C. Butler

Although I am trying to give general advice on balancing family and career, it is important to understand my perspective so here are some facts. I have a wife who is also an academic. I have two small children that are 3 and 1 years old, respectively. I am a white male. I am an American. I am a pre-tenure assistant professor. I feel as though I have achieved a good balance between family and career.

Advice

1. Accept that things are not going to be perfect.

The notion of the woman or man who excels in every aspect of life is a myth. The people who seem to have it all are an illusion – they have sacrificed some aspect of their life even if it is not readily apparent to you or them. Each day has 24 hours and each year has 365 days. Given the limits of time, it is impossible to do everything perfectly. Make peace with being a normal person and focus your energy on the aspects of life that are most important to you.

2. Achieve the appropriate balance for you.

The appropriate balance between family and career is different for every individual. Take the time to figure out the appropriate balance for you. Remember too that the appropriate balance can also change over time so it important to reevaluate periodically. Try to maintain this overall balance amidst the daily fluctuations in this balance that occur because of life's realities – deadlines, events, new developments, etc.

3. Don't feel guilty for working.

Working can make you a better spouse and parent in many ways. First, it provides income for your family to live on. Second, to the extent that you like your work, it will make you a happier and more fulfilled person, which directly impacts your family. Third, working gives you a much-needed mental and physical break.

4. Don't feel guilty for spending time with your family.

Academia provides a lot of freedom, which is good and bad. One benefit of this freedom is that it is much easier to balance family and career than in other vocations. However, a cost is that you could always be doing more. In a way, each scientist is her or his own brand, and you can always be improving your brand. Stick to the balance that you want and don't feel guilty about it. Much like working will benefit your family, spending time with your family will benefit your work. And, most importantly, the whole reason that you want to achieve balance is that you enjoy spending time with your family, so why not try to actually enjoy it.

5. Choose wisely and be happy with your choices.

One reason that people feel stressed about time management is the abundance of choice both at work and in the rest of life. With so many things to buy, watch, read, eat, do, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Follow your heart in making choices and try to be happy with those choices. Part of being happy is not worrying about “missing out” on everything else you could be doing.

6. Be present in the moment.

Try to leave work at work and home at home at least some of the time. Usually the problem is leaving work at work. Whenever possible, erect some barriers to help with this goal. Leave your laptop at work every night. Leave your phone in another room so that you don't check email when you are spending time with your family. Being present in the moment will make you more effective at whatever you are trying to do, and it will make you feel as though you have spent your time wisely.