

CHAPTER 5

FINDING LIFE BALANCE

Strategies for Change

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is the first of the second part of the book which aims to offer the reader practical ideas to living a more balanced lifestyle. The following chapters do not claim to have the perfect solutions, because life balance is a very complex and interconnected phenomenon, but they do offer techniques to think differently about how you approach and view your life balance and share strategies to facilitate living in a more personally fulfilling or harmonious way.

To begin this journey I will start by exploring the importance of your personal sense of self: your knowledge and understanding of your own self-identity and why that is essential to finding fulfillment and satisfaction in your own life balance. If you think about it, this is common sense: if you know who you are and want you really want from life then you will feel more fulfilled, and consequently, experience a greater sense of meaning and wellbeing in life.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this apparently simple suggestion is not as easy as it seems. In our busy lives we frequently forget about seeking personal knowledge and meaning in life; these kinds of existential questions are parked on the side whilst we run around doing whatever it is we think we *need* or feel we *have* to do.

These drives toward doing are intricately interwoven with the sense of self and, in part, shape our identity, highlighting how social, political and cultural concepts are integral to our understanding of who we are because they profoundly influence it.

In this chapter we will explore how these different influences interweave to form the multiple facets or dimensions of the self; as individuals we truly do have many faces.

Now this journey of discovery is, of course, just one step toward change and living your life differently. Consequently, the ensuing chapters will support this quest by exploring how we can be more mindful in everyday life (Chapter 6); how we can think about time differently to achieve a sense of personal meaning in life (Chapter 7); how we can establish a sense of personal autonomy over life balance even in cultures that intensify imbalance and in situations in which others have more power than us (Chapter 8), and finally, how we can think about life balance in a more interconnected way (Chapter 9). In this sense we end up with a mix of different strategies that we can use in synergy to grow and sustain a more balanced lifestyle in everyday life.

A SENSE OF SELF: KNOWING WHO I AM AND WHAT IS MEANINGFUL TO ME

Knowing who you are and what you really want out of life is really important in understanding what your ideal everyday life balance looks like; but answering those questions is not necessarily easy because we do not spend much time really thinking about them. To begin to explore this, we will consider first what a sense of self or self-identity is, and then how we can begin to get to know our true 'self' a little better.

THE SELF-IDENTITY

Our notion of our self-identity or 'self-concept', namely, the knowledge, feelings and assumptions we have about ourselves is complex. It is shaped by many factors including by our relationship with the social and natural (or external) worlds, our perceptions of how we see our inner self or selves (our personal inner world), and how those worlds interact and the congruence or incongruence between our view of the 'self' and how others see us. This means the sense of self is both multidimensional and interconnected: a

product of many parts. Yet it is also mutable because we have a temporal nature, we grow older; the human consciousness means we can learn, feel, think, adapt and become more than our present selves. In fact it is this very ability that is the basis of personal growth, i.e. the capacity to fulfill one's potential and self-actualize or be all that you can be in life.

This may sound a little complicated, but I will now explore these different aspects of the identity in more detail and describe how they are relevant to our life balance. Critical in this context of life balance are the relationships and congruence between the *ought*, *ideal* and *actual* selves, the *past*, *present* and *future* selves and the *relational* selves.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE OUGHT, IDEAL AND ACTUAL SELVES ON LIFE BALANCE

The actual, ideal and ought selves are aspects of the self-concept that have a profound influence on life balance. The *actual* self is the representation of the attributes you, as an individual (the personal/internal facet), and/or significant others (the external/social facet) *believe* you do *actually* hold: this is you acting and being in the everyday context (see Figure 5.1).

Alternatively, the *ideal* self is composed of the attributes that you (internal/personal) and/or significant others (external/social) would *like* or *hope* you will become and correspondingly, also represents the person you and/or they would *least* like you to become, i.e. the feared self (see Figure 5.1).

Finally, the *ought* self is the representation of the attributes, specifically in terms of responsibilities and obligations, that you believe (internal/personal) and/or significant others believe (external/social) you *should* hold. It carries the sense of duty and obligations you feel that you *have to* do every day and is strongly shaped by what others expect of you; this is the self that says; 'I think I should be doing this' (see Figure 5.1).

Now the problem with these three aspects of the self is that they do always coalesce and to add to this conflict can be incongruent (discrepant) in a variety of ways. First, as I have described, each of the aspects of the self has two faces: the one *you think* you have or want (internal/personal) and the one *others think* you have or *should* want or have (external/social), and these two faces can either match (be congruent) or differ (be incongruent or discrepant). For example, *your viewpoint* about your ideal self, or what you want out of life and what *others expect you* to become or want can be different. Alternatively, the things *you think* you ought to do and the

things *others think* you ought to do can also be congruent or incongruent (discrepant).

Second, the three aspects of the self need to be in harmony with each other if you are to feel in balance or congruent in life. For example, your ideal self (the aspirational or becoming self) and what you actually do every day (the actual or real self) may be incongruent because your hopes and aspirations do not match what you are actually doing in your everyday life. For example, you have to work and be busy to such an extent that you cannot fit in the piano or gardening, which is your ideal activity; or your actual and ought selves may be incongruent because you cannot fit in all the work or caring commitments you want to because there is just not the space to do it (see Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1 The ought, ideal and actual selves

As I have discussed these possible discrepancies, it has probably become clear that these multiple selves are influenced by stereotypes and the socio-cultural-political structures that surround our everyday lives and shape

our expectations, values and behaviors. The problem with this is that in neoliberal economies both the ideal and actual selves are strongly shaped by the ought selves. Think about it: I or you *ought* to be in paid work; I or you *ought* to be busy; I or you *ought* to be managing all my/your commitments/obligations; I or you *ought* to be personally responsible. Consequently, these ‘oughts’ can become the things to strive for, sublimating the ideal self and identifying what the actual self *should* be doing.

But what if *your* image of your ideal self is something else, or you sit outside of that perfect ‘ought’ image for some reason? This is a huge problem because *your* image of your ideal self is what *you want to* strive for to fulfill your potential and that is thwarted. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that if you experience this kind of incongruence or discrepancy, whether it is between two or more of your three aspects, or between your personal expectations and the expectations of others (the external/social), then you can often feel less fulfilled, more conflicted and consequently imbalanced in life.

Now that might seem complicated enough, but there are also other dimensions of the self that shape our self-identity and are part of who we are. We all have a biography or life story: a past, present and future self, if you like; and we are all *relational* beings, ‘entangled with significant others’ (Andersen and Chen 2002, p.619) because we exist in and of networks and complex relationships. These multiple facets of the self have implications for our ‘self-definition, self-evaluation, self-regulation, and most broadly for personality functioning, expressed in relation to others’ (Andersen and Chen 2002, p.169). This means we have many other dimensions of the self which shape our unique personality to consider before we can understand a little more about who we are and how this self-concept influences our life balance.

PRESENT, PAST AND FUTURE SELVES

The ought, actual and ideal selves are in part a product of, and further complicated by, our notions and understandings of our former selves: our past and upbringing (who I was/where I came from); our present selves (who I am now, my current traits, beliefs and values) and our possible future selves, identified by our goals, aspirations, hopes, fears and fantasies about the possible future (who I can or could become). Working together as a whole, the past, present and possible future selves intertwine to provide a sense of biographical continuity: a consistent ‘me’ over time if you like,

and create a schema or framework through which we see our 'self' and understand our everyday experiences. This is about your personality; your unique self.

The ideas we hold about our future selves are important for two reasons. First, they reflect our belief in our potential and consequently motivate and incentivize our present behavior (what I need to aim for and what I need to avoid) and second, we evaluate our present selves in light of these imagined futures and find ourselves achieving or wanting.

Since future selves are not manifest but rather *imagined*, so they are most vulnerable to the possibility of change and can potentiate different futures in response to present occurrences; if our self-concept is shaken by present events then the future self can become more negative and vice versa. How you respond to these events can also be influenced by your personality and traits: 'An optimist is a person who extrapolates possible selves on the basis of positive current experiences, whereas a pessimist extrapolates possible selves on the basis of negative current experiences' (Markus and Nurius 1986, p.966). This is your cup half-full and cup half-empty scenario.

Now of course, whilst as individuals we are free to develop a multitude of possible selves and make personal choices about who we are and who we want to become, these identities are, like the ought, ideal and actual selves, shaped by the socio-cultural-political context in which we are embedded and the values of significant others in our life domains. Our upbringing can have powerful influences over how we see the world, how we function and respond to our natural and social environments, and how we envisage our potential, and can also characterize how positive or negative we are about our future. In essence, these aspects of the self can shape our personalities and identify the values we hold about paid and unpaid work, our families, our self-esteem, self-worth and drives. Thus, how others have influenced us over time is relevant to who we become and how we respond to and react in our everyday dance of life balance, as well as how we measure our success in our socio-cultural life and our worth in our work or family performance. This leads on to the importance of the relational self as a dimension of self-identity.

THE RELATIONAL SELF

If you think about your life in terms of the relationships and interactions you have with significant others (people with whom you have close, emotional relationships or who are significant in your life) you will recognize how

those relationships have shaped your individual personality, both in your childhood, as you constructed a core sense of identity, and then throughout your life, as you grow, because the actual, anticipated or remembered evaluations and concerns of significant others are continually organized into your working self-concept (Markus and Nurius 1986). This means that the sense of self is shaped by the expectations of, and interactions with, others, and acculturates self-worth as a measure of achieving specific social norms or outcomes in small, significant groups or settings, as well as in wider socio-cultural customs (Andersen and Chen 2002).

Relational selves are closely associated with a sense of belonging and therefore are an influential source regarding how we reflexively identify the necessary interpersonal patterns of behavior to be accepted (or indeed rejected) by those near to us, and consequently are intertwined with the past, present and future selves as well as supporting the ideal and ought selves, which are connected with those wider relationships embedded in social structures.

The relational self is a powerful contender in the personality stakes; it is a potent force in creating our emotional and motivational relevancies, in building our individual differences, and consequently underpins how we, as people, can respond differently to life situations including how we cope with and dance out our own life balance. From these descriptions it is probably becoming very clear how incongruence in these multiple aspects of the self-identity (see Figure 5.2) can influence your life balance, and I will now offer some possible scenarios.

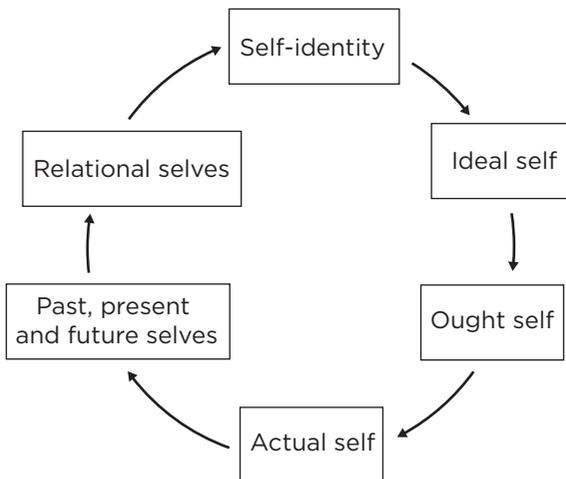


Figure 5.2 The cycle of multiple selves influencing self-identity

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LIFE BALANCE?

As I have already mentioned, when the ideal self (who I or others *want* me to be), the real or actual self (who I am or who others *think* I am) and ‘ought’ self (who I or *others* think I *should* be) are compatible or *congruent* with each other, then you will live a more balanced lifestyle, because you will feel you are being and becoming who you want to be. However, when you broaden your understanding of the self-concept to encompass the other aspects or dimensions of the self, you recognize that you also have to achieve a sense of harmony with these other facets, including the past, present, future and relational selves, if you are to attain a positive sense of wellbeing in terms of life balance, and this is about how your personality and relationships can underpin a state of imbalance. Let’s look at this in more detail.

INCONGRUENCE BETWEEN THE OUGHT, IDEAL AND ACTUAL SELVES

In terms of life balance, it is very easy to confuse the ideal self with the ‘ought’ self and lose out on the actual self as a consequence. This happens because social drivers and norms suggest to us that paid work, for example, is the most prestigious activity to participate in and consequently we put this first, irrespective of our own personal values and meaningful activities. Worryingly, we often do this because we think this is the right thing to do. These means we compromise, often unwittingly, those things we value or want to do the most by striving for socially valued goals, and may even convince or dupe ourselves into believing these occupations *are* personally meaningful to us. Handy described how he fell into this kind of trap and explains how he experienced a loss of purpose and self-esteem as a consequence:

The problem was that in trying to be someone else I neglected to concentrate on the person I could be. That idea was too frightening to contemplate at the time. I was happier going along with the conventions of the time, measuring success in terms of money and position, climbing ladders which others placed in my way, collecting things and contacts rather than giving expression to my own beliefs and personality. (1997, p.86)

Accounts like this challenge us to see beyond the symbolic and social capital of paid work and indeed the notion of obligation located in the unpaid obligatory tasks we do every day, to see ourselves differently and accommodate into our lives our own personal interests. This is not an easy

task because we are constrained and shaped by expected norms and we also have strategies for self-protection, including self-delusion, which prevents the need to confront ourselves in terms of living a more balanced lifestyle, but as Handy points out, you do have a real self that deserves to be let out. So what can you do in this situation?

Find the real you: The actual self

As mentioned earlier, the actual self is the real you and is, in part, shaped by your values, passions, talents or skills. Finding this self and being honest about who you are in life will provide a space to be more creative and fulfilled, if you can accommodate the time and energy to spend in activities that you find personally meaningful and resonate with your intrinsic values. By being true to yourself and knowing who you are, you have a grounded sense of self that you can be centered by and return to when life throws you off balance (Wheatley 1999). One of the occupational therapists I spoke to described this as follows:

If you want to have a balance you can work it out I think. Usually you can negotiate with people and work it out. But if you want to be a workaholic and work all the hours you can make that choice as well. And pretty much if you stress yourself out like that then it's down to you to make that decision and to let people do that to you or do that to yourself ultimately. You need to be yourself as well rather than just the various labels that you have as you go through life. And have a chance, you know, just to be what you want to be.

Now the challenge, of course, is the actual self is not only complicated by the ideal and ought selves, but by the past, present, future and relational selves, who can convincingly divert you from your preferred path and so challenge this process of self-regulation.

THE PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE AND RELATIONAL SELVES

I have already described why knowing who you are is very important because this provides that grounded point in which you can find your center when you are thrown off balance; but how your personality has been shaped by others is vital to understanding how you, as an individual, respond to life imbalance and what strategies you use to establish balance in your life.

Sian, one of the occupational therapists I spoke to, talked about how her relationships with her parents (significant others) and her childhood

experiences with them (relational self and past self) had influenced her behavior and attitudes to work:

I think I am a perfectionist. I think I have just naturally, through my upbringing and background, got very high expectations of myself and I think other people have got them of me.

This learned behavior, this adopted attitude, made her work harder and longer and created stress and imbalance in her life.

Mhari, another of the occupational therapists, described how her present relationships in her family meant she was expected by her significant others to carry the full domestic load, even though she now worked in paid employment. She was unhappy with this situation and wanted to change it, but felt unable to because, prior to taking on paid part-time work, this was the way things had always been done (past self), and this pattern met the obligations and expectations of the family (relational self and ought self by others). As these were now taken-for-granted aspects of her everyday life (actual self) and were embedded into the aspects of her the daily interactions with significant others (relational selves) they were hard to challenge and change and Mhari accepted this; 'I know that a lot of it is my fault because I have always done it, you know. And his mother always did it. He [husband] never did anything at home before we got married. I always... I did it you know. So.'

Clearly then, the sense of life balance we have is intricately linked to who we are, and in common with that sense of self is reflected a complex web of perceptions held by self and others, shaped by interactions over time, which may or not be congruent with who we think we are or want to be. One could suggest that life balance is an essential aspect of the sense of self because how we interact with life is through activities and how we make sense of that life experience is through dimensions of meaning; consequently, the search for balance is, in part, a search for self and meaning in life as these three things, balance, self and meaning, walk hand in hand.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALITIES IN SEEKING LIFE BALANCE

If balance, self and meaning are integrated, then knowing who you are and what is meaningful to you is key to finding your personal sense of balance, and consequently fulfillment and wellbeing, in life. So to begin this section,

I want you to think about your personality type in terms of how you deal with life balance.

IDENTIFY YOUR OWN PERSONALITY TYPE

Now you will have probably heard of several different ways of categorizing personalities and you may well have had a go at some of the questionnaires or tests available to do this. I am not going to ask you to do anything as complicated as that. I just want you to think about how you respond to your life balance; how you think about what you do in your life and whether any of the following descriptions resonate with you.

The 'aholics'

You may recall from Chapter 1 that Schaeff (2004, p.22) has identified that in our over-busy world people can develop obsessive or addictive tendencies about being busy, becoming workaholics, rushaholics, busyaholics or careaholics, all of whom 'do' obligatory activities in life to the exclusion of anything else. Now I have certainly been a workaholic and recognize that aspects of my personality and upbringing brought me to that point. However, I have met others who fall firmly into one or more of the other obsessive behaviors and these patterns dominate their lives, eroding meaning, engagement, balance and wellbeing. So what about you? Can you see yourself in any of these behavioral patterns and if so, what aspects of your personality brought you here? (see Figure 5.3).

Now an important point to consider here is that although the 'aholics' tend to be very driven, addictive or obsessive-compulsive types (Huw in Chapter 3 is an example of a workaholic), in our over-busy lives the need to develop one or more of these behaviors in order to cope with the high level of obligations and busyness is far more prevalent than in societies or cultures that *do not* drive overwork and busyness as the norm.

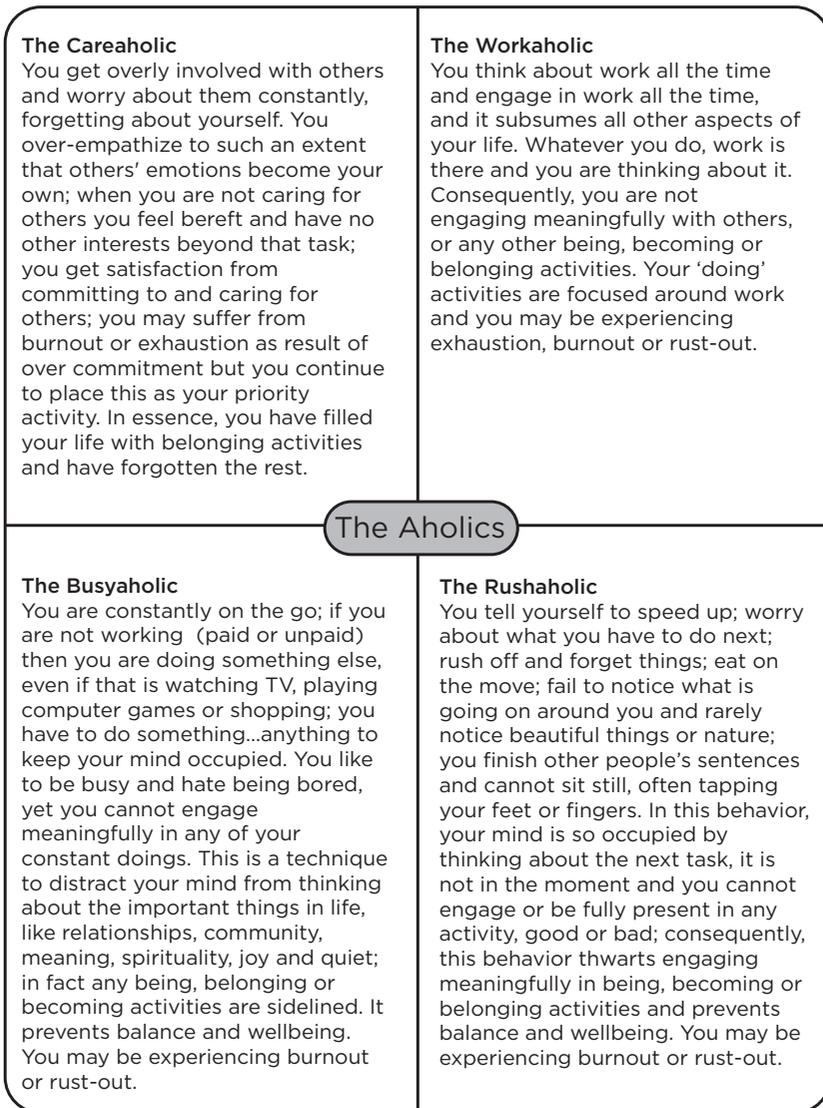


Figure 5.3 Workaholic, rushaholic, busyaholic and careaholic

Adapted from Schaeff (2004), p.22.

This is a notable point, because it means that Western economies push levels of addiction; but it also means that those of us who do not walk the obsessive path or do not love work, busyness or speed exclusively can still get forced into adopting certain strategies in order to survive.

Now this can be an unwitting adaption, or you may notice it happening and either fight against it or try to avoid it completely. These individual differences in how we respond to these pressures are due to our unique personality traits, which are, of course, a reflection of the multiple selves we dance with every day. So if you do not fall into the obsessive or addictive personality type and do not want to utilize that coping strategy, or if you do not love working constantly, or being busy, or you hate rushing around like a headless chicken but find that it is enforced on you, what do you do? Hochschild (2008, pp.85–88) has identified five different time management or *temporal* strategies that she believes people use to deal with busyness and overwork in terms of life imbalance. These strategies do, to some extent, support those offered by Schaeff (2004), but rather than obfuscating with personal obsession, suggest strategies that are adopted when external pressures create over work and over-busyness and we have to cope somehow; in these circumstances, she believes we adopt behaviors that can be classified as the Busy Bee, the Endurer, the Deferrer, the Outsourcer and the Resister (Hochschild 2008, pp.85–8).



Figure 5.4 *The Busy Bee*

Busy Bees

I have started with the Busy Bee because this resonates so closely with Schaeff's (2004) vision of the busyaholic and rushaholic. If you are a Busy Bee then you see the busyness of life as a challenge to be overcome and do this by actually embodying or incorporating a speeded up lifestyle into your self-identity and everyday routines; you are constantly busy, actually feel energized by the ensuing pressure, and love it. Your identity is wrapped in the fast pace of life and you gain satisfaction from that. You are not prepared

to let anything go and do it all; you just divide life up into the necessary time packets to make it work and juggle with joy.

Now of course the problem with this kind of temporal (time) strategy is that you are so busy being busy, you have little or no time to just be, or become anything other than busy. You may do family tasks and caring and even do it well, but what about the feeling and emotional context? What about the time just to be a family, a parent, partner, lover or friend? When do you stop spinning, look, listen, hear and respond with feeling? When do you see beauty, feel the wind or smell the sea? This kind of life ends in burnout or rust-out because you exhaust yourself, or lose any sense of meaning or purpose in life, and just exist rather than live.



Figure 5.5 The Endurer

Endurers

If you are an Endurer then, according to Hochschild (2008), you manage the pressures and conflicts in your life balance by compromising personally meaningful pursuits to get the obligatory tasks done. If you are using this temporal strategy, you might feel you exist in a daily round of everyday routines and habits. You may love your family and care about them, but you may also feel you cannot engage with them in the way you want to, that is, meaningfully, because you do not have the energy, attention or time to do so. You might feel exhausted and overburdened, and if you stay in this state for any length of time you might start to experience exhaustion.

Many of the occupational therapists I spoke to used this temporal strategy to cope with everyday life and it was marked by conflict, compromise and predominantly burnout, but for some rust-out as the routinized nature of life became so repetitive and staid they began to detach from it. This is not

a good way to live your life and requires an injection of meaning, passion, joy, excitement and spontaneity to make it worthwhile.



Figure 5.6 *The Deferrer*

Deferrers

If you are a Deferrer then you will believe the situation you are in will get better. It might be bad now, and yes it is stressful, but this is just for now; later, and this can be months or years later, it will improve. This is a different perspective from the Endurer, who accepts things are as they are, because the Deferrer sees light at the end of the tunnel and feels the conflict situation is temporary not permanent. River, an occupational therapist, for example, described how she saw her loss of meaningful activities and promotion at work as a transitory phase en route to her child growing older and therefore not needing so much of her time and energy resources: 'I know it will come back; you know in time that it will come back and I will be able to commit more to my own personal goals that I'm missing at the moment.' The trouble with this kind of strategy is that 'Get Better Land' is never actually achieved.



Figure 5.7 *The Outsourcer*

Outsourcers

If you are an Outsourcer you will do just what it says on the box: you will go to other people to support you with the activities you cannot fit in, including the meaningful and interesting ones. This can be caring for the family, as well as domestic chores, and when it includes the former, according to Hochschild (2008), it has to include excellence in the quality of care in order to make the Outsourcer feel as if they can continue to give love to those they care about. This kind of idea resonates with the notion of quality not quantity in terms of the time you can give to your children, and is related to the sense of guilt we all carry when we are forced into this coping strategy. This was a technique used by many of the occupational therapists in the case studies, especially those who were part of a dual career couple working full-time. In reality, of course, like many of the other coping strategies, the choices available to working parents are all a double-edged sword with, yes, methods to support in managing work and life commitments, but none of which feel truly adequate.

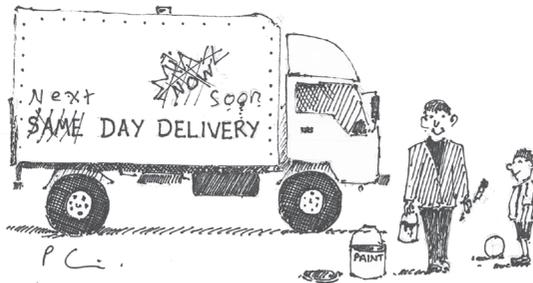


Figure 5.8 The Resister

Resisters

If you are a Resister, then instead of adapting to the demands and schedules thrust upon you, you alter them, or at least try to take it down a gear and not get wrapped up in the drive to be busy, to meet demands, buy others time or defer happiness until some future date. No, you will adapt your life situation to achieve what you want to do and attain the best outcome for you, even if this means you do not always flourish at work because you are not tied up with the need to chase the dream of success.

As Ariel has shown us (see Chapter 3), if you are a Resister then, unsurprisingly, you will tend to be happier and have a better quality of life

than Endurers, Deferrers, Busy Bees or Outsourcers, but you might have to compromise, and compromise a lot, to get what you want in terms of balance in life. Nonetheless, resisting is a sound strategy to adopt in seeking life balance in the present work-mad and over-busy world.

Now that you know what your temporal strategy is in terms of how you are managing life balance, the next stage is to think about whether or not you need to adapt or change it to achieve a more balanced approach to life. The problem with this is that in order to modify how you behave, you have to review how you *think* and *feel* and this is not an easy task, because in general we have little or no awareness of our thoughts and even less recognition of how they underpin what we do and how we respond to external events (review discussions in Chapter 4 if you need to refresh your memory about this). So what can you do to get to know your thoughts a little better?

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT LIFE BALANCE

Thoughts are a fascinating and very powerful means of influencing how you feel about your life balance and how stressed you are in life. The basic assumption is that your thoughts and beliefs can act upon and influence your feelings and actions (Beck 1976). Of course there are different types of people and different ways of viewing the world: some have a glass half-full approach, others a glass half-empty. Depending on this perspective, one can view the same situation very differently, and consequently it is your unique interpretation of an event that underpins how you feel and react in any one situation and, in this sense, there is an element of choice in how you respond to stimuli and how you can manage it (Neenan and Dryden 2011). There are different techniques to ‘manage’ or raise awareness of your thoughts and to either challenge or change how those thoughts might be affecting your everyday sense of self, performance and life balance.

Changing your thoughts

You may recall from Chapter 4 that thoughts can emerge spontaneously or in response to particular stimuli. They frequently work in the background, are often subliminal, or are noted merely as white noise or mental chatter. Where these thought patterns are negative and recurrent, you can become trapped in a spiral of negativity, which can stream unchecked through your mind (see Figure 4.5). The more negative these thoughts become, the more stressed they will make you feel and that frames how you enact your everyday

doing, being, belonging and becoming activities and, fundamentally, shapes your experience of life balance. The problem with this is that if these thoughts are left to have free reign and are unchecked then they will, in essence, impact on how you behave and feel in your everyday life; so the question is how do we manage them?

Theories such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), relaxation therapy, thought stopping techniques, meditation and mindfulness can all offer strategies to help you gain control over these negative thoughts in order to improve the way you feel. I will talk about mindfulness in the next chapter, as I do believe this has a specific affinity to life balance, but here I want to discuss the cognitive therapies, namely, those that actively capture your thoughts and change how you think as an effective tool in managing life imbalance.

COGNITIVE THERAPIES

Cognitive or thinking therapies (CT) have many forms, including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), cognitive behavioral coaching (CBC), thought stopping techniques and relaxation therapy. They all work on a similar underlying principle, and that is that negative thoughts can occur automatically and that these can be addressed and changed. These thought patterns are sustained by distorted beliefs or errors in judgments, which can be categorized in a variety of ways. Table 5.1 gives examples of negative and distorted cognitive patterns that are common in our everyday thinking about life balance. Read these through and see if you can identify any of these negative patterns of thinking in yourself.

Table 5.1 Negative or distorted cognitive patterns in life balance

Cognitive distortions	Definition
Overgeneralization	Based on one or a small number of events an individual draws unwarranted conclusions, which have wider negative implications. <i>‘Management see us as a small and whining group and they all just ignore us.’</i>
Catastrophic thinking	Where an over-generalization is amplified to extreme proportions. <i>‘This is a nightmare. If I don’t start getting enough sleep I will go crazy! I’ll end up losing my job, my home, everything!’</i>
Maximize and minimize	The tendency to exaggerate negative experiences in terms of daily activities, events or interpersonal relationships and minimize the positives. This is about making actual happenings seem worse than they actually were/ are. <i>‘He was really horrible to me in the meeting. He hates me. It’s because I supported the merger. He’s never liked me and he’s out to get me.’</i>
Absolute or black and white thinking e.g. all or nothing thinking	Unnecessary placing of complex issues into two possible polarized extremes in terms of outcome. Situations are viewed in either/or terms. There is no in-between: <i>‘Either I can achieve a successful work–life balance or I can’t and I’m a complete failure at it’.</i>
Mind reading	Drawing conclusions on the basis of inadequate information e.g.: <i>‘My boss didn’t email me back. She thinks I’m a waste of space. I know she doesn’t like me.’</i>

Cognitive distortions	Definition
Crystal ball gazing or fortune telling	Pessimistic view of things that might occur: <i>'Oh my God. The boss has called me to the office. I just know this isn't going to turn out well!'</i>
Personalization or taking the blame (remember personal responsibility-taking in Chapter 2? This is a symptom of it – seeing the self as the responsible agent)	Instead of labeling only the behavior, you attach the label to yourself, e.g. <i>'I failed to complete the job, so that makes me a failure'.</i>
Selective negative focus or mental filter; ignoring the actual evidence	Undesirable or negative events, memories, or implications are focused on at the expense of recalling or identifying other, more neutral or positive information. Positive information may be ignored or disqualified as irrelevant, atypical, or trivial. This is the glass half-empty approach: <i>'There's no point talking about managing my life balance because nothing will change; it never does. So it's not worth trying really because it won't make a difference.'</i>

Adapted from Beck *et al.* (1979) and Friedman, Thase and Wright (2008).

If you recognize yourself in any of these examples, then try the following:

- Step 1: recognize them as distortions or errors in judgment and accept that they bend the truth or reality of the situation.
- Step 2: begin to revise how you think about that situation.
- Step 3: identify a more accurate and evidence-based appraisal of events which is more accurate and positive and could facilitate a move towards self-management and resolutions.
- Step 4: put that accurate and more positive pattern into action.
- Step 5: review and repeat the process.

Now whilst research has shown that cognitive therapies can be as effective as medication in treating stress, depression and anxiety, all of which occur in life imbalance, in order to benefit from these techniques you need to

commit yourself to the process, and that is not an easy pledge to make. A therapist or coach can help and advise you, but they cannot make your problems go away without your full co-operation; this means you have to *want* to do it. Once you make that commitment, then hopefully you will benefit. Some simple techniques to support these steps for you try yourself at home follow.

THOUGHT STOPPING TECHNIQUES

Thought stopping techniques are a key technique to change how you think about your life balance. If you consider the five steps I noted earlier, you may have wondered how you could stop the negative thoughts from reoccurring and yes, although repeating the five steps would help, there is another method that is very useful in doing this, and that is thought stopping techniques. So what are these and how do you do them?

You will recall that I spoke about the mental chatter or white noise in your head which, if you pay attention to it, can turn out to be very negative thoughts that underpin how you think and feel, and that if you capture those thoughts, review them and adapt them into a more realistic or positive pattern, so your wellbeing will improve. Well, thought stopping techniques support this by helping you to break that negative cycle.

Take, for example, some of the common negative thought patterns voiced in Chapters 2 and 3: waking at night continually mulling things over about work, or visions of being hamsters stuck on incessantly turning wheels and wanting to shout 'stop' and jump off. Both these scenarios provide perfect examples for when you can find thought stopping techniques useful.

In the first, for example, when you wake at night, you might visually imagine yourself pressing a red stop button or jamming the cogs of worry, ending those persistent and negative thoughts, and then replace that undesirable pattern with a more positive or realistic evaluation of the situation. In the second, you might actually envision yourself slowing your speed down gently on the wheel (like on the treadmill in the gym), jamming it with a plank of wood or, if you are a real dare devil, jumping off... that one would not work for me... I'd panic! So the image has to suit you and mean something to you; it is an image about being in control or having some sense of autonomy over your own thinking and feelings about life balance and, if you remember, autonomy is a key tool in finding your own life balance.

Sometimes your thought stopping techniques can need re-enforcements to help break the negative cycle or maintain the new pattern of thinking. Remember that once negative patterns have been established they can be darn hard to change because your mind automatically switches on to them whenever you are stressed (remember the amygdala in Chapter 4) and as long as the sympathetic nervous system remains on, you are stuck on that negative track. This is where relaxation and deep breathing techniques can help.

RELAXATION AND DEEP BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Sometimes the thought stopping techniques need a little help to break the cycle by switching the sympathetic track off and the parasympathetic track on. Learning relaxation techniques can support this because, as I described in Chapter 4, if you are relaxed you cannot be stressed and in a relaxed state you can think more positively and feel more in balance.

A key stage in understanding how to relax is to learn how to breathe. This is not as daft as it sounds because most of the time we do not breathe deeply. When you are rushing around, enduring, deferring and even resisting you are active and using energy. Often, as part of this, and particularly when you are stressed and the sympathetic system is switched on, you breathe shallowly to conserve your energy (go back and take a look at Figure 4.2). When you breathe shallowly you breathe into the upper quadrant of the ribcage, which increases or maintains the stress and tension you hold in the body. To counteract this you need to learn how to breathe deeply into the abdomen, because this can switch the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system on.

To practice how this feels try lying on the floor or bed and inhale through your nose; feel the breath traveling down into your lungs and notice how the ribcage expands, first at the level of the breastbone, then at the level of the diaphragm and finally, how the breath flows into the abdomen and how that rises to accommodate that life-giving breath. When you breathe out, breathe out through the mouth; first the abdomen will fall, followed by the lower then upper part of the ribcage and finally, that stale air from your body will be expelled.

Box 5.1 runs through this process using a simple three breath approach; the more often you practice this technique, the more you will benefit and learn how to relax. Over time, this technique can enable you to facilitate feeling relaxed in even the most stressful situations.

Box 5.1 Three breaths to deep breathing

- Close your eyes if you can.
- Focus on the breath and inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth.
- Lengthen your breath for a count of three:
 - breathe in through the nose for the count of three
 - hold the breath for the count of three
 - breathe out through the mouth for the count of three.
- Pause for one normal breath.
- Repeat until you have completed the cycle three times.
- Resume normal breathing.
- If it helps you, say this mantra in your mind:
 - when I exhale I breathe out stress
 - when I inhale I breathe in serenity.

There are many forms of relaxation, and what you like and which method you use is basically a personal choice based on preference or possibly need. Jacobson or progressive muscle relaxation, for example, is a good method to use if you are not aware of how it feels to be stressed or how it feels physically to hold tension in your body, because it guides you through this: first tightening (to become aware of tension) and then letting go (to become aware of relaxing) different muscle groups in the body. This is followed by guided visual imagery to help you relax your mind. The best way to do this is to envisage you are either in a safe place you know or somewhere imaginary: in a beautiful forest, at the beach listening to the waves, or sitting on a mountain top and feeling so free your thoughts just melt away.

Autogenic methods, on the other hand, rely more on your own mind letting go of your tension and embracing relaxation. For example, you might begin by imaging your toes, and then your whole right foot, are feeling very warm and comfortable; you imagine the foot is feeling heavy

and very, very relaxed; you then move up to the lower leg, and imagine that too is feeling warm and relaxed; then move to the upper leg and then repeat the process in the left foot and so on. Following completion of this process for the whole body, you again let the mind relax by imagining yourself in a safe and beautiful place of your choosing and just letting yourself dance in the peace and tranquility of it.

There are literally hundreds of examples of these types of relaxation techniques on YouTube, and many are also available as apps for your phone. If you use one of these, this means you can run through the whole process with your eyes closed, lying or sitting in a safe, warm and comfortable room where you will not be disturbed. Alternatively, if you want to use the practical advice offered here to create your own relaxation practice, you will need to remember the steps and use the power of your own mind. Whatever you decide, ensure you practice somewhere where external disruption is kept to a minimum: shut the door, unplug the phone, place your mobile on silent or flight mode and play gentle and soothing music if that helps. The world will still be there when you return, but the colors will be richer and life will seem just that little bit calmer and kinder.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, you can make a difference to your own life balance by getting to know yourself and understanding your own personality and coping strategies in life. You can develop techniques to adapt these, to breathe, relax and keep the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic system switched on. You can engender a sense of autonomy over your own thoughts and make your thinking positive, learning not to ruminate on the past, which can lead to depression or to worry about the future, which can result in anxiety. By utilizing these strategies your life can feel more fulfilled and balanced. However, another key element to remember in life balance is that one of the most important relationships of your 'self' in your life is the relationship with the now, the present moment, and this is the focus of the following chapter.