



Career Home Balance – Finding Time for Self

by ROSS FLOOD

Dr. Linda Duxbury at Carlton University is one of Canada's leading workplace health researchers. She has written hundreds of papers, journals, and books, and is the co-author of a series of influential Health Canada reports about work-life balance in Canada. Dr. Duxbury's research which confirms the traditional view that work and family life are mutually exclusive domains is being challenged. Work-home conflict is becoming an increasingly important concern for Canadian workers, unions and employers. Unions are pushing for more resources, reduced workloads and hours of work, and improved leave provisions in "family-friendly" bargaining rounds. Pushed by stressed out members, management and unions are making work overload and quality of time top-priority issues at the negotiating table in this country. The work-family conflict occurs when an individual has to perform multiple roles such as worker, volunteer, spouse and parent. These multiple role conflicts can potentially affect all workers, and is referred to as work-life conflict, work-home or career-home conflict.

According to the Vanier Institute for the Family, work-home balance is an increasingly essential component of life as in 67% of Canadian families both parents work at least part-time. Many families still have children or young adults at home and care for or arrange care for elderly parents, the "sandwich generation". Economics, support to children's education, family finances, job security and the competing demands from jobs, family and community stress all families. Many employers are now concerned with work-family issues for both humanitarian and practical reasons. Employees are human and they all have issues outside the workplace – they bring those concerns to work and conversely bring work issues home.

Teachers may need assistance on how to maintain an effective balance, as well as how to be aware of your own warning signs that you need a break. A regular school day may see you dashing from one classroom to another, grabbing a break, dealing with

problems during bus or lunch duty, and dealing with the demands of class preparation and correcting exams. You may also feel that you often take on too much, trying to be perfect and fill every spare moment of the teaching day. Other elements that influence work-life balance are a sense of control or influence over your work environment, physical and emotional well-being and having the common will and support of employers and peers to ensure that all staff have a reasonable work-life balance. If this is you, the tips and ideas in this article may help you to regain the balance in your life, or fine tune areas of your life to create moments to relax.

What does work/career and life balance look like? Teachers in balance can be identified by the following behaviors:

- You have enough time for family and work;
- When something in your life breaks down (babysitter is sick; car breaks down, illness in the family) you have the resources and time to deal with it;
- You are on the path you want to be, both professionally and personally;
- Organizations and employers are prepared to accommodate employees' desire to have a life outside work and school;
- Employers attempt to accommodate employees' needs for increased flexibility and a supportive work environment, within the context of collective agreements;
- Teachers exercise control over those aspects of their life they can influence in the three domains of work, family and leisure;
- Teachers have personal time available daily for leisure activities that provide fun, exercise and diversion from work and home;
- Balance is not a constant; it comes and goes as things change. Life experience, career and job expectations, family roles and your stage in life all affect work-life balance.

Managing your work/life balance

Having time for yourself/leisure, work, and family commitments are the elements of an effective home balance. It is a sense of being in control, being content, focused and achieving goals, while also feeling relaxed and calm enough to cope with changing or challenging situations. To have effective balance, you need awareness of your own warning signs: understanding what may be jeopardizing your health and well-being and clarify what you need to do. Then, you have the time to relax and recharge so that you can work at your best.

Monitoring your pressure valves – the warning signs

You can monitor the warning signs by observing your own feelings, thoughts and behavioral changes. You may show signs of becoming tired and irritable when out of balance, and this affects those around you. Often your thinking, communication and performance suffers, and concentration and attention span are impacted. You can be prone to making mistakes and work performance and quality can be adversely affected. Generally feeling low, poor self-esteem and self-confidence and chronic illness can often be other warning signs of being off balance. Some people rely on alcohol use and increased smoking or increased eating as coping mechanisms, which will not help in the long term.

Changing your thinking

Changing your coping skills often leads to more control and finding time for relaxation are techniques to improve work-life balance. Changing your thoughts from negative to more positive and focusing on your overall achievements and not your failures are ways to start becoming more positive and less stressed about the classroom. Start looking at what you have achieved during each school day, and valuing what you do, rather than thinking negatively of what you have not been able to accomplish.

Creating moments to relax

Creating precious moments to relax involves developing a reserve of activities and strategies that you can call upon in busy times to regain control and influence your ability to work at your best. It involves taking time every day to look after yourself, including healthy eating, time for leisure, friends and exercise. The following ideas from an article that first appeared in *Teaching Expertise*, July 2004 (<http://teachingexpertise.com/articles/life-beyond-classroom-672>) provide techniques on creating work-life balance:

- If you take work home, set times when you will deal with this and be strict about it. Don't get distracted

and then allow the work to drag on all night/weekend. Make sure you have a 'stop time' so that you can relax.

- Gradually build time for yourself. Once you've built up 10 minutes 'for me', try to increase this time to 20 minutes and then spend 30 minutes just doing nothing. If you can, let your mind drift.
- Clear your desk at the end of the day and be less hassled when you get in the next day.
- Ban sticky notes from your desk. You'll be distracted and react to them, rather than completing anything.
- Refuse to argue over small things. It's a waste of time to bicker and causes more stress in the end.

From an article titled *Time to Relax and Recharge* (<http://teachingexpertise.com/articles/time-relax-recharge-677>), other tips that teachers can use to enhance their work-life balance include:

- Commit to leaving school on time at least 2-3 days each week. This will enable you to slowly get into a new and more positive habit.
- If involved in extra curricular activities, don't over extend yourself. Gain and maintain time for yourself – learn to say no!
- Getting relaxed can be as simple as taking a 10-minute walk or doing something different before starting the next major task ahead of you.
- Exercise is usually the first thing to be eliminated when we feel pressured, yet it is one of the most important aspects to maintaining your balance.
- Take a mental timeout through visualizing or guided imagery, which has the effect of creating a healthy pause or brain-break, allowing your mind time to assimilate information.

Survival tips

You can create more time to relax and recharge by being more organized and effective in how you manage your time and asking friends and colleagues for help. Sharing ideas and concerns with others creates a sounding board to resolve issues faster. This allows you more time to focus on what really matters to you. Determine what is really important and which aspects of your work and life you can influence, discarding those things you cannot control or are really of little importance to you. Organize home life to simplify activities, and have everyone in the household help and share the jobs that need to be done. Prioritize what matters most to you in relation to your work and family. When you indulge in the things that you enjoy you can begin to re-charge yourself and start improving your work-life balance.

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