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# Finally, the Secret to **WORK-LIFE** Balance

If trying to balance your work and home life makes you feel like you're skating blindfolded on very thin ice, you're not alone

By Kerry McCarthy

**I**magine going in to work one morning and your boss telling you that your job description has changed. On top of your current, already-demanding role, you're now expected to start work at 6 am, shop and cook for your colleagues, pay all the company bills, clean the office and do everyone's laundry. Then, you must stay at work every night until everyone else is taken care of and asleep. You're expected to do all these extras without a pay increase and probably with fewer holidays than normal, and you'll have what amounts to zero free time each day.

Sounds crazy, right? Well, yes, although you've probably twigged that for many women—perhaps for you, too—this scenario is already happening. Only, as well as being the undervalued, over-worked and, frankly, completely knackered employee, you're also your own slave-driving boss. Juggling demanding careers, families, partners, friends and ageing parents has many women today feeling unbalanced and exhausted.

Research from the University of South Australia's Centre for Work + Life tells us that seven out of 10 working mothers admit to almost

always feeling rushed or pressed for time, and one-third say their work often restricts the time they spend with their families. "Over the past 20 years, time for us as individual women—time to rest, look after our health or just take a break—has been squeezed the most," says Barbara Pocock, PhD, director of the Centre for Work + Life.

We pretend we're coping, justify our choices, accept our lot, maybe even kid ourselves that we love being busy. But in reality, we're just holding on for dear life, with very little control. "The feminist legacy has been great at letting us know that we can have it all," says psychotherapist and *Prevention* adviser Marie Rowland. "We just need to catch up with the idea that we can't have it all at once, and that's okay."

## Have It All, But Not All at Once

"There isn't a perfect recipe for the ideally tipped work-life balance," says Pocock. The Hon Kate Ellis MP, Minister for the Status of Women, agrees. "We need to acknowledge that no two women are the same, and that everyone has unique family, work and life circumstances." Generally, though, Australian women are

carrying a heavy load at home, in the workplace and in their communities. "Women continue to do the majority of unpaid work and care of children and other relatives," says Ellis.

And this is where it all gets out of kilter, with the seesaw hitting the ground very hard and doing us serious damage. Labelled Superwoman Syndrome, this status quo can have serious health consequences. Research shows that in addition to feeling fatigue, experiencing poor health from lack of exercise and having no time to rest or recuperate, people who work longer hours are more at risk of depression and cardiovascular disease.

We're also putting our personal relationships in peril, says Rowland. By not doing regular exercise or getting enough sleep, we become less competent as well as resentful of our loved ones and colleagues.

We have to be brave enough to admit we *can't* do everything all at once, and we have to make choices. The key, says Pocock, is to take a long-term view. Those of us who keep deferring our personal needs until we retire or our children grow up are missing out on life. "You don't get just one chance at a promotion or to build a

Australia was ranked ninth out of 32 countries for best work-life balance in 2009

business," she says. "You get lots of chances over your lifetime, and any short-term penalty [arising from taking maternity leave or working part-time] you think will be very significant, usually isn't." If you want to be around more for your kids, see whether you can work part-time to achieve that. Want that big promotion? Hire some help—a weekly cleaner, for example—to give you back some hours in your downtime.

Think of work-life balance as a rich chocolate cake. Having it all might seem appealing, but in reality, you wouldn't *want* to eat the whole thing. It's much healthier to cut it into manageable slices that, eaten over time, will taste so much sweeter.

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## Take an Hour a Day

An increasingly pressure-filled and invasive work culture is partly to blame for the unhealthy skew of the modern woman's life. For example, many of our jobs require us to answer emails from home and to be available online, even after a full day's work. Such technology really can help make our lives more flexible, but in exchange, Pocock says, managers could be more mindful of the needs of female workers, and make options like job-sharing, part-time hours and staggered start and finish times more acceptable.

If you weren't locked in to battling peak-hour traffic and being at your desk at 9 am, you'd be more able to take an hour for yourself every day. You might, for example, spend the hour from 6:30 to 7:30 am clearing your emails and planning your workday. Then you could walk your kids to school, do a weights session or some energising yoga and get to work by 10:30. Or take a full and restorative lunch hour.

Managers need to recognise that women's participation in the workforce has considerably increased over the past decade, and that the

demands on their time are different from those of the 1960s' male, for whom and by whom much of our current work culture was designed. But it's also up to us to start seeing our health, fitness and basic sanity as equally important to getting the washing done or being at work all the time.

Rowland suggests scheduling an hour into your day that's just about you. By slotting 60 minutes of 'me time' into your diary or on the to-do list on your fridge, you're giving that time the same status as taking the kids to the dentist or finishing that report. "We need to stop being so hard on ourselves and put ourselves closer to the top of the priority pyramid," she says.

## Act Like You're Not Alone

We're not just hard on ourselves; we're hard on each other. "If I could give one piece of advice, it would be that—as women—we need to be doing more to support each other," says Ellis. "Too often, a workplace culture of few women competing for few positions means we tend to be overly critical of each other. Outside the workplace, too, we often see women judging

## Your Back-to-Balance Checklist



**1. TALK TO YOUR BOSS** Before you quit your job and create a whole new raft of problems for yourself, ask your boss whether there are any ways you can reduce your hours or workload. Job-sharing, having staggered hours or working from a home office for a few days a week could give you back more of your life.



**2. SCHEDULE YOUR OWN TIME** Block out 60 minutes in your diary every day that's entirely for you. Whether you spend it walking on the beach, reading a book while sipping a cappuccino or taking a fitness class, make sure you take the time as seriously as you would any work meeting. It sounds easier than it is. Commit!



**3. LEARN HOW TO SAY NO** As hard as it may be to admit, you're not Superwoman. The next time a lazy colleague asks you to do his or her share of that report or a friend decides that it's your turn (again) to pick up the kids from school, try a polite but firm, "I'd really like to help, but I'm just too swamped right now."



**4. PUT ON THE BRAKES** Just because you have 30 minutes free between meetings or a spare night during the week doesn't mean you need to fill that time. Try to make spare time part of every day. It will better prepare you for what's ahead, and you won't feel quite so stressed when your diary does fill up.



**5. ASK FOR HELP** Don't wait until you're about to collapse with exhaustion before you reach for a helping hand. Empowering your colleagues, your children and your partner by asking for help not only allows you to delegate some to-do-list items, but also makes them feel like they're contributing in a real way.

# We've got it!

other women for the choices they make about family. We all know the guilt that, for women, often goes hand in hand with the difficult daily decisions we make trying to balance work and life. I think it could be a little easier if the judgement of others wasn't weighing on top of it."

Pocock puts it another way: "I'd encourage women to remember that they aren't alone in feeling overloaded—that we're all doing our best to hold it together." At the very least, this notion will make us more supportive in our attitudes. But take it a step further, and we could find ourselves sharing tasks to gain time. Take turns with another mum to attend swimming lessons or soccer matches; on your week off, you could go to the movies or relax with a book. Or organise with a friend or neighbour to eat at each other's house once a week, so you can both look forward to a bit of reciprocal downtime—enjoying good food, catching up on the latest goss and sharing your work-life-balance strategies. After all, a problem shared is a problem halved.

Women spend three times longer than their partners on domestic chores, such as washing and cleaning

## Love What You Do

Too many of us lose sleep over the fact that we're not getting the balance right, which in itself is counterproductive. If you need to put extra effort into one aspect of your life—say, helping a child through a difficult patch at school, sorting out household finances or developing an area of expertise at work—acknowledge that you've decided to put your focus there and enjoy the process, what you discover along the way and your achievement. The secret to feeling balanced lies in appreciating and loving each area we choose to focus on in our lives. "We need to value being a mother in the same way we value being a worker," explains Rowland. "By not just seeing self-worth as financial worth, we'll create a greater self-awareness and have a true appreciation of what we're capable of achieving."

Two readers share their balancing-act secrets

## "Stress was killing me"

Angie Reed, 45, Byron Bay

Five years ago, my life revolved around work. I had a job in real estate and worked 12-hour days, seven days a week. I was eating junk and not exercising—I put on 20 kg! I was having chest and arm pain, and I couldn't walk more than a few steps without being out of breath. I knew things had to change, so I started prioritising my health. I moved closer to the coast, and suddenly, my commute went from 75 km to a five-minute drive! I started working only three days a week, so I had more time for myself and my kids. I took a salary cut, but the benefits far outweighed the sacrifice. I believe that by focusing on your life in equal parts—health, family, work, happiness—rather than on just one area, you can redesign your life to find a better balance. It's about being realistic.

**Angie's secret:** Take a little break every day for what I call 'white-space time'. Read or walk, but don't have any to-do lists for that time; just focus on yourself.

