

Achieving a work-life balance

The author's advice can help you overcome barriers to balancing work and life.

By Julie Boertje, MS, RN, LMFT, QMRP, and Liz Ferron, MSW, LICSW

Almost everyone agrees that achieving a work-life balance is a good thing. Without it, we risk long-term negative effects on our physical and mental health, our relationships, and our work performance. But many clinicians have a hard time achieving this balance due to job demands, erratic work schedules, or the inability to say no when someone asks for help.

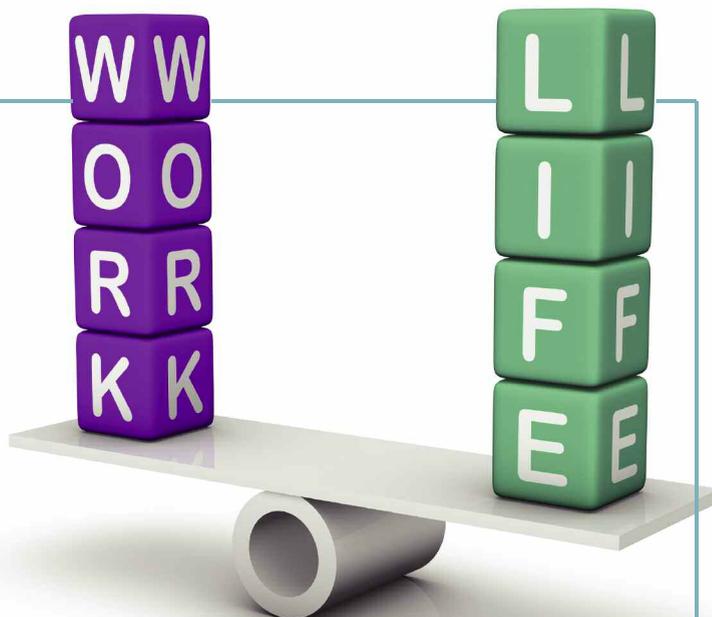
The challenges of stress and burnout

Stress and job burnout can cause, contribute to, or result from a poor work-life balance. They disrupt our normal patterns, behaviors, and feelings.

Of course, no one can escape stress altogether. Sometimes stress is a good thing, but we need to be able to identify when it's a problem. For many clinicians, stress springs from the desire to provide good service and care in all parts of their lives. This desire can create stress, especially when barriers exist to achieving it.

Barriers to balancing work and life

Some barriers are external and outside one's control. These may include everything from inadequate staffing levels to changes in practice expectations due to



healthcare reform. Generational differences among healthcare providers also may pose an external barrier. Clinicians from different generations have different training, expectations, and skill sets. This can lead to new paradigms, changes, conflict, and other challenges.

Other stressors are more personal and internal—and within one's control. Most clinicians try to stay hopeful and promote realistic hope in their patients, but this can be exhausting. What's more, time, age, and life stage can change a person, altering his or her goals, priorities, and perhaps bedside manner. This can create a gap between the goal of on-the-job perfection and the realities of daily life. Guilt and frustration can result.

How to help yourself

First, come to terms with some fundamentals. Acceptance is a good starting point for combating stress. Start by acknowledging the things you can't change. Then develop better coping strategies so you can address your feelings about these things and help remove them as barriers to finding a work-life balance.

- Embrace your perfectionism, but be alert to when it's tormenting you or others. When it comes to patient safety, perfection is a necessity. But because

we're human, we sometimes make mistakes. We need to be able to learn from them and move on, or the result can be crippling. When patient safety isn't at risk, try to do the best you can; you simply don't have the time to dwell on entering information in a chart perfectly. Give it a once-over to make sure it's accurate, then move on.

- Develop empathy for others, rather than judging them. Judging others and finding they don't meet your expectations adds unnecessary stress. Instead, ask questions and seek to understand their point of view.
- Take a "time out" when possible if things get overwhelming. Do some deep breathing or brief meditation. This helps ground you so you're better able to focus, concentrate, and stay calm.

Moving toward a better balance

Once you've set ground rules for yourself, achieving a better work-life balance can help clear away other stressors. Don't take shortcuts here: Either you make work-life balance a priority or you don't. If you decide to make it a priority, recognize you don't need to change everything at once. Just making a few changes can lead to better-than-expected results.

More effective time management

For most clinicians, practicing better time management is a challenge because we have so many demands we may perceive as conflicting. Here are ways to manage your time more effectively:

- Sit down with your spouse or partner to discuss and negotiate relationship expectations.
- Align your priorities and values between home and work.

- Look for areas where you should set limits and boundaries on your time—both at home and at work—and stick to them.
- Set limits with patients while still conveying empathy and instilling their confidence in your care.
- Seek mentors who model good time management, and ask for their advice and guidance.
- Work on self-acceptance for the person you are today. Acknowledge that

**Develop
empathy for
others, rather than
judging them.**

you're doing your best, and keep boundaries by trusting and allowing others to do their job.

Stronger relationships

Relationship problems can be a great drain on your time and emotional energy. Here are some ways to strengthen your relationships both at work and at home.

- Engage in necessary conversations regarding conflict. Addressing conflict and moving beyond it can make an enormous difference in your feelings and perceptions.
- Set regular times to get together with family and friends, and stick to those plans. Find time for regularly scheduled family meetings and meals together. Everyone may have to give a

little to make this happen, but it will be worth it.

- Give people the benefit of a doubt and avoid jumping to conclusions. Work on identifying obstacles to trust.
- Be open to reasonable feedback.
- Ask for help and delegate responsibilities and duties when possible.

Better self-care

Make yourself a priority by practicing good self-care. To build “down” time into your schedule, take restorative breaks throughout the day. Enroll in a yoga, Pilates, or mindfulness meditation class or other activity that helps reduce stress. Read fiction, write in a journal, or meditate.

Take time to reflect on the positive parts of your day and life. Doing this before bedtime can promote a good night’s sleep. Speaking of sleep, make it a priority. If you can’t get a full night’s sleep, take short naps.

Never underestimate the power of small changes.

Identify more ways to integrate exercise into your day. Exercise is the cheapest antidepressant around. Go for a 10-minute walk outside the clinic or hospital. Purchase exercise equipment for your home, or use onsite facilities if they’re available. Get a partner for workouts, running, or other activities.

Improve your nutrition by sitting down

to breakfast, taking a break for lunch, bringing healthy snacks to work, and being there for family dinners.

Take care of yourself mentally and emotionally. Acknowledge losses and give yourself permission to grieve.

Identify workplace and personal challenges that create stress, and develop an action plan for addressing or coping with them. Set realistic goals for stress management and update them as needed, either alone or with a coach, therapist, friend, or partner.

One step at a time

Perhaps you agree with our advice, but think your life is too overwhelming and demanding to put our recommendations into practice. If so, keep in mind that just wishing and hoping things will get better won’t make it happen. You may end up wishing and hoping for the rest of your life.

So take it one small step at a time. Never underestimate the power of small changes. Start by making one small change that takes just a few minutes. After the first week, evaluate the results of this change. You may find they’re good enough to inspire you to make further changes.

Finally, don’t go it alone. Look for and request support in areas that seem the most challenging. Consider your organization’s employee assistance program (EAP), a life coach, a peer coach, family or marital counseling, and individual counseling. The investment you make in yourself will help you become a better clinician, increase your satisfaction, and have a positive effect that carries over into all areas of your life. ■

The authors work at Midwest EAP Solutions in St. Cloud, Minnesota. Julie Boertje is a nurse peer coach. Liz Ferron is a senior EAP consultant.