



All Work and No Play: Restoring Balance

John R. Cook, Ph.D.
Registered Psychologist

Step #1: Acknowledge the Importance of Balance

The Evidence

Two landmark studies have convinced me of the importance of taking balance seriously in my life. The first was a 1992 study of on-the-job and off-the-job stress factors in 28,000 American workers by the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company. The second was a 1999 study by Mayberg and associates of depressed and saddened people using positron emission tomography (PET) scans of their brains.

In the St. Paul Fire and Marine study, a strong relationship was found between stress at work and employee burnout and health and performance problems. Somewhat surprisingly, of all the personal life problems in these workers lives, ones created by their jobs were far and away the most potent. Furthermore, workers who managed to establish a healthy balance between work and personal life displayed less burnout and fewer health and performance problems.

The Mayberg study, gave tangible evidence of a relationship between our mental abilities (e.g., concentration, attention, decision-making) and our experience of strong negative emotion. If we take the human brain in cross-section and compared with the human fist, the seat of human intelligence is at the top of our fist in the neocortex. In contrast, the fleshy parts of our fingertips represent emotional centers based in our more primitive limbic system. Researchers found a reciprocal changes in the activity levels of these two areas that corresponded to changes in mood.

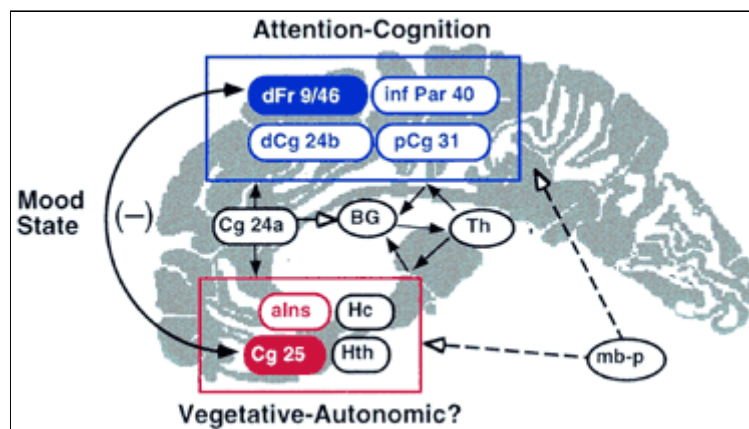


Figure 1: Schematic Model Illustrating Reciprocal Relationships between Regions Mediating Shifts in Negative Mood State (Mayberg et al., 1999, p. 680).

The implication of both the studies is that in the absence of fun, we risk the potential for chronic stress and stress related diseases as well as a mind-numbing effects of depressed mood. Hence the old adage "All work and no play make Jack a dull boy" seems to have some merit.

The Obstacles

Some of the roadblocks you will encounter in restoring balance in your life are the habits and personality traits that knocked you of balance the first place. Review the list and see how many apply to you.

Figure 2: The Dull Boy's Credo

1. Live life in the fast lane - rush to go places and to get things done.
2. Live by a double standard - a higher one for yourself than anyone else.
3. Live for the next opportunities to strive and compete.
4. Live to be liked - try to be all things do people.

The Cost

The cost of disregarding the delicate balance between home and job, and between fun and work is enormous. Seventy-five to ninety percent of visits to family physicians are due to stress-related disorders. The annual cost of stress to United States industry in terms of absenteeism, lost productivity, accidents and medical insurance claims is well in excess of 200 billion. Unfortunately, the problem is not uniquely American.

Last spring's study of 1,500 Canadians by the Conference Board of Canada revealed more than 47 percent of those interviewed reported moderate or high levels of stress, up from 27 percent in 1989. In addition to the usual work overload, threat of layoff, and mismanagement, workers complained of conflict between their work and home lives. Evidence some employers are beginning to take this issue seriously was found in 52 percent of medium and large businesses that had employee wellness plans such as employee assistance programs.

Step #2: Recognize the Signs of Being Out of Balance

What can we do about the problem on our own? Many of us are self-employed or work in small businesses that do not have employee assistance programs or even extended benefits. The first step is to take an inventory of your stress symptoms. Some of the mental signs of stress are what Edstrom (1993) refers to as "mind flu". Remember, even minor symptoms have their value for being early warning signs that your life is getting out of hand, and that you need to do something about it now before the problem worsens.

Figure 3: Mental, Physical and Behavioral Signs of Stress

Mental ("mind flu")	Physical	Behavioral
feeling overwhelmed	muscle tension	getting less done
loss of pleasure, apathy	trembling or shaking	taking more time
low achievement motivation	stomach discomfort	giving up more easily
increased irritability	heart palpitations	temper outbursts
labile mood	excessive perspiration	restless
low self-worth	chest pains	withdrawal

Step #3: Consult an Expert

The second step involves taking advice from the experts on having fun, our children. There's something very compelling about having fun for children. Leave them along for a few minutes. Chances are they'll either find something fun to do, or make what they are doing fun, by the time you return. The other remarkable feature of their activity is that it is typically high-energy, so much so it makes us tired just watching. Some of the other characteristics of childhood activity are:

1. Jumping from one activity to the next, displaying a variety of interests
2. Laughing and smiling, expressing emotions freely
3. Trying new activities even if they aren't good at them
4. Resting when their bodies tell them to

Interestingly, these same behaviors can be seen in many creative and energetic adults, leading some to propose a direct link between play and productivity. The link has been taken seriously enough that some large corporations provide exercise and recreation space and encourage staff to take play breaks.

Step #4: Figure Out What's Fun

For the rest of us, the challenge is to find time to play and to rediscover what we consider to be fun in life. Ann McGee-Cooper (1992) offers a tool for doing this called

the Fun Inventory.

Figure 4: Fun Inventory

2 to 5 minutes	5 to 30 minutes	30 min. to half a day	half a day or more
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It works by sitting down with a friend (or two) and generating list of activities you think may give you pleasure. The items are broken down according to how long it will take for you to "get to" them. That way you'll have a range of fun activities of varying duration to suit the amount of free time you have available.

Step #5: Follow Through From Intention to Action

Once we've generated a list of possible fun activities, there's only one more thing to do - translate our intention into action. The tendency is to keep on doing what we are used to, ignoring our intention to have fun in favor of satisfying some other more immediate and pressing need or opportunity. We follow the principle of "the squeaky wheel gets the grease", and in our responsible, grown-up lives many things squeak louder than having fun. We have obligations and commitments - people depending on us, jobs to go to and house work to get done.

It's time to bring fun to the front burner and turn up the heat. We have to engineer our environment to make our intention to have fun the "squeakiest" wheel of all, often by making "deals" with yourself and others. The main difference between adults and children is that for the adult fun alone is not a big enough squeak to make it happen. Consequently we have to be a much more deliberate and planful in our attempts at fun, finding reasons that make it compelling to have fun right now! Steve Levinson (1999) provides a series of strategies for doing this in his new book *Following Through*.

Spotlighting

Spotlighting is the use of cues to focus your attention on your intention. First ask yourself what are the pro-fun voices in your head? Then create cues to stimulate those voices. In general cues are statements and images that provide a reminder of the rewards for following through - tell you that it's worth it. For example, I've always had the pro-fun voice of "Go fast!". Not being a particularly fast runner, my interest has turned to powerful motorcycles. The cues I often use during work breaks are motorcycle magazines and catalogs, sometimes just minutes at a time.

Willpower leveraging

Willpower leveraging involves taking an easy action now that will make the more difficult desired action more probable later. For example, you determined the form of exercise best suited to your needs is taking long walks at least twice a day, but the matter how early you set the alarm the snooze button takes over. Try buying a dog.

Another example is trying cut back on your cookie consumption. You keep them on hand for your clients, but around 4:00 every afternoon to you get the munchies. Within 20 minutes used to open that can five or six times to indulge yourself. The

solution? Stop buying cookies. Offer your clients something else less tempting to you.

Creating a compelling reason

Creating a compelling reason is also called "Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons." It's like creating an itch just so that you can scratch. When the "right" reason isn't compelling enough to follow through on your intention, create a reason that is. For example, if I really didn't want to be tempted by cookies in my office, I would buy peanut butter cookies. I have an anaphylactic reaction to peanuts. Another example is getting exercise by riding a bicycle to work when it is the only form of transportation available.

Leading the horse to water

Leading the horse to water works on the premise that "80 percent of success is showing up" (Woody Allen). The successful implementation of this technique relies on separating the easy "getting started" part from the more difficult "getting it done" part. Tell yourself going in that you only have to do the easy part, and then go ahead, but be prepared for a pleasant surprise. Most people complete what they start. I used this technique to start an exercise program at a fitness club. I told myself I was simply going in to shower.

Going too far

Going too far is a paradoxical technique. It involves making an intention more effective by threatening to violate it and a big way. Steve Levinson calls this "kicking sand in the face of your intention". You start out by making a deal with yourself to do more of the wrong thing. In the case of eating cookies it would involve agreeing to eat cookies in quantities of 5 at a time only. Somehow I don't mind going back four times, but taking five cookies is something I naturally resist.

Right before wrong

Right before wrong to is another form of deal you make with yourself to do the right thing before you do the wrong thing. Again in the case of cookies you would make a deal to eat something healthy like raw vegetables first, before reaching for the cookie can. In the case of creating balance, it might involve putting play before work.

Strike while the iron is hot

Strike while the iron is hot is an approach I hope you'll take on learning about the merits of introducing balance into your life. If there are already some things you're thinking about doing differently, don't wait until tomorrow or the day after to get started. Do it now or forget it!

Conclusion

It is important for us to maintain a healthy balance between our work and our personal life. The evidence is compelling and comes in very different forms - an epidemiological study by the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company, and a narrow physiological study by Mayberg et al. (1999). All work and no play really does make Jack a dull boy! I summarized some of the roadblocks to restoring balance in

the form of a dull boy's credo, and outlined the human cost to Canadians of ignoring the problem.

The first step for us in restoring balance is to recognize the signs of imbalance in our life, and remember even the most minor symptoms of stress have value as early warning signs. Next, we must learn from our children - the experts on having fun. Toward this end, I gave you a fun inventory to complete. However, no task is really complete without talking about translating your fine intentions into action. This can be done through spotlighting, willpower leveraging, creating a compelling reason, leading the horse to water, going to far, doing right before wrong and striking while the iron is hot.

Recommended Reading

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