

Work-Life Balance

by: Sabine Goldberg

My father was a world-renowned workaholic literature professor. My mother was a stay-at-home mom, despite being trained as a pharmacist. Their work-life balance consisted of doing his paid work and her doing everything else (the second shift). Obviously, this recipe was not going to work for my husband, a sole-practitioner personal injury attorney, and myself as a USDA-ARS research soil chemist (a career from which I retired in May 2016 after 33 years of service). We had to develop a new system, some of which I would like to share with you.

- 1) **Organize:** This one is a no-brainer! I always had to-do lists with due dates at work. At home, we use Post-it notes on our cabinet, which sometimes looks like a Christmas tree. At that point, we know that we need to get serious.
- 2) **Say no:** Young scientists feel compelled to accept all tasks and all invitations that come their way. This is not necessary! Over the years, I have learned to ask myself two questions: Do I want to do this? Do I need to do this? If the answer to both of these is no, then I say no to the invitation. After a little bit of practice, I have to tell you, it feels really good to say no. This allows me to concentrate my time on my most important research priorities. Part of being well organized is being able to say no.
- 3) **Evenings and weekends are personal time:** In my case, personal time means family time. Except for very unusual, extenuating, and rare circumstances, my husband and I leave our offices at 5:15 PM and do not work on weekends. Spending time with our two boys is wonderfully relaxing and recharges us for the workweek ahead. That is not to say that we are not serious about our careers. Just that we have learned to concentrate fully on our work at the office, but not to bring it home. We strive for excellence in everything we do: work and play. Fortunately, we were able to instill this trait into our two sons who are now PhD students in biology and computer science, respectively.
- 4) **Exercise:** Last but not least, exercise is a vital part of my routine. In addition to weights and swimming, I go for three ½ hour walks per day: In the morning before work, during the morning coffee break time, and during my lunch hour. These breaks enhance my productivity by allowing me to clear the cobwebs out of my brain. I return to work refreshed and with new ideas.
- 5) **Multitask:** Multitasking is essential for me. When I am too busy to read the newspaper, I listen to the news on National Public Radio on my drive to work. I do hand weights while reading my email in the morning and while watching the evening news. I walk around my swimming pool before work, and used to keep an eye on my kids through the window to make sure that they ate their breakfasts. My best problem solving time is actually when I am in the shower or I am walking. I believe that this is because in these situations, I put no pressure on myself to solve problems but let my mind wander freely, thus nurturing creativity.

My last comment on work-life balance is that, like so many things in life, there is no one-size-

fits-all solution. If you think that your work and personal life are in balance, they probably are. However, if you feel that you are a slave to your job at the expense of your personal life, you may want to make changes. We all differ in how much of our total energy we want to put into grams our jobs. The suggestions that I have presented worked for me as a scientist, wife, and mother of two sons.