

The Work-Life Balance Myth

What's in it for me? Overcome daily stress by creating harmony in your life.

Do you spend most of the day at work performing under pressure? Do you then go home and end up snapping at your loved ones, only to regret it later? Unfortunately, constant stress is an all too common factor among modern professionals, and the consequences can be dire. To combat this, you've probably heard of the importance of maintaining a work-life balance. While this concept has been popularized by HR departments and the media, in these blinks you'll see how striving for balance is not realistic. In fact, your life is much richer than just work and life. In these blinks, you'll learn how to identify the five other "slices of life," and integrate them to handle daily pressure. In these blinks, you'll learn

why aspiring to a work-life balance is futile; how you can be on call 18 hours a day and still live a harmonious life; and how to make time for new activities when your schedule is packed.

The goal is not work-life balance, but harmony across all areas of your life.

Imagine you've just gotten home from a lousy day at work, where your boss has announced impending layoffs. As you walk in, you run into your teenage daughter, with whom you've had a strained relationship lately, and soon find yourself embroiled in a recurring argument with her. When she storms off, you sit down to go through the mail, only to find a letter from the IRS: you're being audited. You think you're going to implode. You've probably experienced a sense of overwhelm at least

once in your life. While it's normal to have the occasional stressful day or week, too many successful professionals end up in a spiral of daily pressures, crushed by the desperate feeling of having no way out. The key message here is: The goal is not work-life balance, but harmony across all areas of your life. The workplace is often to blame for the lack of harmony in modern lifestyles. That's not surprising, considering 76 percent of employees in the United States report feeling burned out at work. With most professionals working to provide for themselves and their families, one in four Americans claims they're highly stressed from having to juggle heavy workloads and family responsibilities, and struggle to squeeze in outside interests. As a result, the term work-life balance has become notorious as an idealized notion for preventing burnout. But seeking balance, argues author David J. McNeff, is actually futile. While the stakes are undoubtedly high if you're expected to be on call for 18 hours a day, letting stress take over your life isn't the fault of the work itself. Rather, the feeling of stress accumulating to a crisis point is a result of spending all your waking time in two areas - the Family and Professional "Slices" of your life - while neglecting the other five: the Personal, Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Spiritual slices. The author calls these the "Seven Slices" that collectively make up your life. Instead of trying to play a balancing act to no avail, thinking in terms of the Seven Slices means that you strive for harmony across the various areas that make up your life. Let's look at how you can use the Seven-Slice Method to prevent the problem of stress accumulation, starting by identifying the areas in your own life that require positive attention.

The Seven-Slice Method breaks down all areas of your life that require daily attention.

"How are you?" is one of the most common questions we ask each other every day. If you're finding it hard to manage stress, you might at best answer, "I'm OK" - or, at worst, launch into a frantic tirade about all the responsibilities ahead of you. By contrast, the author - an executive coach - has noticed that clients who're able to handle stress well answer something along the lines of, "Things are hectic now, but it'll be worth it in the long run." No matter what they're going through, their answers

demonstrate confidence in their ability to face current pressures, while looking forward to the future. While it's hard to be fully satisfied with every area of your life all the time, you can attain a similarly practical perspective by connecting with all seven slices of your life each day. Let's look at what these are. Here's the key message: The Seven-Slice Method breaks down all areas of your life that require daily attention. The Seven-Slice Method proposes that each day, seven areas of your life require your mindful attention. Most people tend to focus all of their waking hours on their top priorities; as we've seen, these tend to be the Professional Slice, which involves making a living, and the Family Slice, in which you might play the role of a child, parent, partner, or any combination of those roles. But to achieve harmony in your life, it's essential to pay attention to the five other slices. For one, the Personal Slice involves your hobbies and personal pursuits that are unique to you, as well as the time you spend alone. Meanwhile, the Physical Slice refers to the time you spend taking care of your body, whether through fitness or nourishment. The Intellectual Slice sees your curiosity manifest itself, as, for example, when you read for pleasure, while the Emotional Slice of your life involves how you think and feel about yourself and your circumstances. Finally, the Spiritual Slice involves how your faith, values, and beliefs are nurtured. Ultimately, by committing to living in each slice, you'll develop a deeper connection with yourself and those around you. Now that you know the Seven Slices, let's take a look at how you can use the Seven-Slice Method to reduce stress by integrating them in harmony.

Assess the seven areas of your life to determine where you need to direct attention.

The first step in the Seven-Slice Method is to take an inventory of each area of your life. Of course, if you're already feeling consumed by work and family, it can be daunting to step back and see that you're neglecting values you hold dear. But the advantage of the Seven-Slice Method is precisely in identifying the dormant slices that you need to tend to. The key message is this: Assess the seven areas of your life to determine where you need to direct attention. Start a spreadsheet and, in the first column, label each row with a Slice: Family, Professional,

Physical, Personal, Intellectual, Emotional, and Spiritual. If you're a more visual thinker, you can draw a pie chart instead and fill in the labels. Next, ask yourself what percentage of your time each week you spend in each slice of your life. When assessing your Physical Slice, try to estimate what percentage of time you spend taking care of your body. While figuring out a percentage, also consider whether you exercise regularly, or only when it's convenient. In the same way, when reflecting on your Emotional Slice, consider how often you think about your feelings in a week. Are you in control of them, or is it the other way around? When looking at your Personal and Intellectual Slices, think about how much time you spend engaging in hobbies for pleasure, and learning out of curiosity. Finally, your Spiritual Slice involves the time you spend practicing your faith, if you follow a formal religion, or engaging with your inner world and values, whether through reading, prayer or meditation. After taking the time to consider each of your slices, determine the percentage of your time you spend in each one, and write it down. For a realistic overview, make sure the overall percentage adds up to 100 and not more. Remember, the point is to take an accurate snapshot of what your life looks like right now, so be honest, without any self-judgment. Understanding why some slices dominate your life and others don't is what can provide the stimulus needed for change. Indeed, most of the author's coaching clients discovered they weren't engaging with at least 30 percent of their total lives. For many, this exercise is the pivotal point at which the need for a dramatic reset becomes clear.

Think of the smallest steps you can take to spend time on each slice of your life every day.

Most people don't neglect areas of their lives willingly, or even consciously. You might have lost your social life because you're busy with work and family obligations. Or maybe you stopped attending your book club during a hectic period and never picked it back up. When confronted with activities you used to enjoy, you might shrug and say, Sadly, I don't have time for that anymore. This dismissive response is normal when you're already feeling overwhelmed. That's why the key is to start as small as possible. The key message here is: Think of the

smallest steps you can take to spend time on each slice of your life every day. By now, you've quantified how much time you spend in each slice of your life. The next step is to establish the very smallest action you could take to connect with the dormant slices of your life. Maybe you have three small children and you feel you're going to lose it because managing everybody's lives is becoming unbearable. In that situation, just finding five or ten minutes to meditate can give you a lifeline of hope. One of the author's clients, Rosa, longed to get in touch with her Spiritual Slice, but felt powerless because she was strapped for time. Her solution was to schedule a few minutes to read spiritual literature every Wednesday during her morning coffee. After the first month, Rosa reported that those 20 minutes per week were having a positive psychological impact on her. Once she began to experience the benefits of that time, she decided to increase the weekly frequency. Your calendar can be a helpful tool to this end. Another one of the author's clients worked from home with her husband and noticed how they were so exhausted from their videoconference meetings that they couldn't communicate with each other by the end of each day. So they decided to set a daily one-hour appointment in their calendars from 5:30 p.m. to take a walk together around the neighborhood. In this way, they tended to their Personal, Physical, and Family Slices all at once, while their relationship and attitude toward the pressures of working from home improved.

Consider your personal motivation style when determining your plan of action.

One of the author's clients, a businessman named Dan, found that he spent zero percent of his life on his Emotional Slice. He knew that couldn't continue, given that he was having problems in all of his interpersonal relationships – including at work, where colleagues complained he was sometimes “tone deaf” or disengaged. The author recommended a crash course in emotional intelligence, and Dan agreed that this didactic approach reflected his preferred learning method. During his emotional intelligence training, Dan and the author profiled people in Dan's life so that he could start to “read” them better. This experience of learning more about what people were thinking and

feeling meant that Dan's own Emotional Slice began to awaken. While this approach worked for Dan, it wouldn't work as well for a person who has a more conceptual way of seeing things. So when planning how you'll address all slices of your life, make sure to establish what makes you tick. Here's the key message: Consider your personal motivation style when determining your plan of action. Now it's time to plan the steps you'll take to integrate the different slices of your life. But first, it's helpful to identify your motivation style. Are you someone who's more group-oriented, or are you a self-starter? Do you tend to start off strong when beginning something, only to lose interest quickly? The more your plan is customized to motivate you, the more likely you'll be to stick with it. Another one of the author's clients, Jack, was a curious individual who was known for responding to new ideas positively at work. So it was no surprise that Jack decided to take a different approach than most clients. Instead of coming up with a strategy for each of his dormant slices, he decided to focus on one - his Personal Slice - which he felt would contribute to all the others. Over the next year, meeting a psychotherapist weekly would be the foundational activity from which he'd work through the other slices. Jack took this approach because, knowing himself, he felt sure that without it, he'd eventually slide back into old behaviors and ignore his life's other slices. In the same way, you know what works for you. Although there's no one-size-fits-all approach to the Seven-Slice Method, using it as a foundation is helpful no matter your objective.

It's not about the amount of time you spend in each area of your life each day, but the quality of it.

Picture a symphony orchestra getting set to perform. The musicians are waiting for the conductor to tap his music stand. They raise their instruments. In response to the conductor's signals, the orchestra begins to perform as a unit. As its members play, the conductor communicates when the violins should take the lead, when the trumpets should pause, and so on, all while keeping time. In the same way, you're the conductor of your own orchestra, and you have seven instruments to conduct. To

maintain the depth and texture of the music, you need each instrument to be present and successful – but ultimately, it’s up to you to bring about your own sense of harmony. The key message is this: It’s not about the amount of time you spend in each area of your life each day, but the quality of it. No matter how busy you are, living in harmony allows you to manage stress and approach each day with a brighter attitude. It means that you won’t lose your cool in an unexpected traffic jam, and that solutions to big problems will appear more readily available. Above all, the Seven-Slice Method helps you pay attention to the events in your day, to ensure you don’t become entirely absorbed in the emotional ups and downs of daily life. As you’ve seen, it boils down to three phases: assessment, reflection, and action. In practice, this doesn’t have to be so structured, but it’s important to follow a disciplined process and to go through the exercises regularly. If you pick up the method for a couple of weeks and then put it down for a month, you probably won’t get far. But if you say, I’m going to commit to this every Saturday from 6:00 to 6:30 p.m., you can hold yourself accountable – and look forward to it. Remember that it isn’t necessarily how long you spend on each slice that matters, but the quality of that time, and the strength of your commitment. Many people who embrace the Seven-Slice Method over the long term report that “life feels more like a journey,” whereas before it felt more like a chore. In the end, living in the Seven Slices won’t just make you feel better; when you start to feel at ease, so will everyone around you.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Instead of aspiring to the impossible goal of a work-life balance, the Seven-Slice Method demonstrates how you can achieve harmony in your life by paying attention to each of its key seven areas, or slices, each day. Once you grasp how your life is divided in the context of Family, Professional, Personal, Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Spiritual Slices, you can begin to make a plan to reintegrate each area of your life that you’ve been neglecting. No matter how busy or stressed you are, the Seven-Slice Method can help to introduce harmony to you and those around you. Actionable advice: Determine what’s distracting you. If you want to determine whether an activity is contributing to harmony in your life or is just a distraction, check in with yourself. After bingeing your favorite TV shows for a few hours, ask yourself if you feel refreshed. If yes, then this activity is

serving your Personal Slice. But if you feel the same or even more drained once you turn off the TV, then maybe it's time to rethink how much time you spend watching it. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Work-Life Balance Myth as the subject line, and share your thoughts!