



Work–life balance: Finding strategies to manage it all

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A few years after graduate school, my husband and I lost our three-year-old to a lifelong battle with infant leukemia. After she died and I began to resurrect my career, I became pregnant with our second child, and I started to wonder how, or if, I could balance all the demands and challenges of a new baby and a new career amid the fresh scars of grief. The feminist credo that I grew up with told me I could have it all—if I kept my nose to the grindstone, worked at a superhuman pace, and avoided the emotional labyrinth of death and rebirth. Instead of embracing this credo, I questioned my choice to return to a career that requires laser-like focus and rewards lost weekends in the lab. I had already literally lost a child to cancer; was I willing to figuratively sacrifice another to the demands of a career in science? Was there a way

to have it all **and** hold on to what I had?

The short answer was a resounding no. Even with an incredibly supportive and dedicated spouse, I didn't see how I could successfully achieve this elusive and delusional equilibrium. But I wasn't ready to walk away from my lifelong science journey. I needed help to develop successful strategies for managing my wellness, my family, and my career. I turned to mentors and other women in science for advice. From their experiences and knowledge, I developed my "SOS Approach" to work-life balance: Strategic planning, Outsourcing, and most importantly, Saying no.

Strategic Planning

In the past three years, I've managed to reduce stress levels by implementing strategic plans in experimental frameworks, writing, and preparing scientific communications. As a principal investigator, I can easily get lost in emails, writing assignments, and sidebar conversations. To avoid the black hole of distraction, I strategically plan my days and weeks to prioritize tasks and writing projects. After evaluating my near- and long-term goals, I make annual, monthly, and weekly plans that help me set priorities, focus resources, and make sure that our team is working towards our common mission. Daily writing time, even just a half hour or an hour of time dedicated to original writing, helps me stay on track to develop manuscripts, grants, and reports. I am always shocked at how quickly drafts emerge after I developed my daily writing habit. Having a strategic plan sketched out along various time frames also allows me to track my commitments, so that I can easily say no when requests don't fit into my plan or mission.

Outsourcing

In my first days back in the lab, I attended a workshop on women in science presented by Dr. Joan Bennett, Distinguished Professor of Plant Biology and Pathology at Rutgers

University and founder of the Rutgers Office for the Promotion of Women in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics. When asked about strategies for maintaining work–life balance, Dr. Bennett recommended outsourcing. She offered that hiring others to take over day–to–day domestic responsibilities allows dual–career households and single parents to focus on family. After hearing her talk, I admitted to my husband that my responsibilities at home were overwhelming, and we needed to enlist outside resources. We reprioritized our household budget and hired professionals to help us manage our home. The people we pay to provide childcare, to clean our home, and do time–consuming maintenance have become part of our village. The epiphany that I had during Dr. Bennett's presentation also freed me from the guilt I harbored about not doing it all.

"Even though feminists had paved roads to make sure that I had the opportunity to realize my scientific aspirations, to be a full-time caregiver, and to manage a household, that didn't mean that I was required to do all three at the same time."

Saying No

A close colleague is a champion at saying no to all the right things. When I asked what motivated him to turn down international travel opportunities and high-profile collaborations, he simply said that saying “yes” actually meant saying “no”; when he committed his time to another project, meeting, or obligation, it meant that he was taking time away from something else—and often enough “something else” was family. This conversation inspired me to start evaluating my strategic plan when considering a new project. What other commitments would suffer if I said yes? Do I actually have the time and resources to be successful? How does this benefit my career, the careers of my staff and students, and our collective scientific mission? Over the years, I've become better at evaluating the answers to these questions and saying no to extra assignments with limited rewards.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had catastrophic effects on families and economies. For me, the sheer notion of work-life balance was destroyed as I struggled to accomplish my research mission with limited access to laboratories, reduced personnel, a sudden switch to homeschooling, reduced access to paid caregivers, and a thousand other unforeseen complications and distractions. Some lessons have emerged. Video conferences are an effective means to plan and communicate science. While technology cannot completely replace in-person interactions, reduced travel means more time with my kiddo and less pressure on my spouse to take the reins while I travel. Flexible work hours and telework have reduced my commute times and allowed me to work a more dynamic and fluid schedule. Establishing good telework habits have taken nearly a year for me to develop; I work earlier in the morning and later in the evening, so I can manage days that are sometimes filled with homeschool or hybrid learning. I schedule shorter and more directed meetings. I say no more often. By integrating these new habits into a non-pandemic normal, I'm hoping that when the

pandemic ends, when our labs and classrooms reopen, I can continue to refine my work–life balance; helping me become a better mom, a better mentor, and a better scientist.

Editor's note

This article is part of a series written by members of the Women in Science Committee, for all Society members. For more information, visit

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