Try these 12 tips to improve your work-life balance

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What is work-life balance, and how can you achieve it?
Work-life balance is a key part of self-care when juggling the responsibilities of your workday, home life, and relationships with your family members and other loved ones.

Let’s explore the benefits (for individuals and organizations) of working toward a better work-life balance. We’ll also look at some practical tips for improving it.

**What is a work-life balance?**

Work-life balance is a term that makes intuitive sense to many of us but can be elusive to achieve.

We all know the feeling when demands are piling up on one side of the work-life scale and dominating our days. You may also know the feeling of unfulfilled dreams and desires on the other side of the scale.

They slowly drag people into a vague feeling of discontent and disengagement.

With that said, how can you manage your time and energy in a way that leaves you feeling fulfilled and engaged as a whole human being? What can allow you to show up as your best self and avoid mental exhaustion?

Work-life balance is often used to describe a trade-off. You balance the time spent on work projects versus time spent with family, friends, and personal interests.

It can also refer to the level of flexibility team members feel they have. For instance, is it possible for you to integrate your work with your personal demands? Can you respond as needs arise? To what extent do work and personal priorities interfere with one another?

According to Gallup’s Women in America report, work-life balance encompasses everything that goes into a well-lived life. The report suggests that many women view life and work holistically. As a result, they look for employers who can encourage and support them as people, not just as employees.

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The challenge of reconciling work-life balance has been around for centuries. Reformers in the early 1900s advocated for fair labor standards at a time when people routinely worked more than 100 hours a week.

But the term work-life balance wasn’t coined until the 1980s. The women’s liberation movement used it to describe the challenges faced by working women with families.

Today, work-life balance has expanded to include all genders. It’s also broader than just families.

The idea includes concepts such as:

- Effective time management
- Stress management
- Burnout prevention

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With technology, many professional work cultures and expectations have changed. The result: a more integrated, and fuzzier, relationship between “work” and “personal” time.

No wonder this concept is so difficult when we try to establish (or reestablish) it for ourselves.

**What are the benefits of having work-life balance?**

The benefits of work-life balance are far-reaching and extend to both you and your company.

**Fewer health issues**

According to the Mayo Clinic, overwork and long hours can have several consequences on people. These consequences can include:

- **Fatigue.** This negatively impacts focus and productivity. Your professional reputation can suffer if you’re making mistakes or forgetting commitments.
- **Poor health.** This is a result of both stress and neglecting healthy habits. Stress can affect medical conditions and increases the possibility of substance misuse.
- **Negative impacts on relationships.** This is due to neglect. This undermines one of your major support pillars as a social being.

Additionally, people who work three to four hours of overtime have a 60% higher risk of heart-related problems compared to those who don’t work overtime. Moreover, working any overtime is associated with poorer perceived general health.

Consistently working overtime is also associated with:

- Increased neck and muscle discomfort
- Higher on-the-job injury rates
- Unhealthy weight gain
- Increased likelihood of smoking

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Higher rates of alcohol consumption

Higher productivity

Too much time spent working is directly correlated to a loss of productivity and effectiveness.

Stanford researchers found that after employees work 50 hours or more, their output falls dramatically. It nearly plummets after 55 hours. These researchers also found that workers who reach 70 hours a week don’t produce anything more with the additional 15 hours.

Conversely, when we’re feeling supported and engaged, our physiology responds with a happy soup of neurochemicals. They make us feel more connected, creative, energized, and collaborative.

These effects of feeling supported all directly benefit you and your employer.

Fewer burnouts

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Burnout is a form of mental exhaustion. It can be a sign that your health at work isn’t ideal.

According to Jacinta M. Jiménez, PsyD, there’s a risk of burnout whenever the job environment and the employee don’t match. She describes six person-job mismatches that research has identified as contributing to burnout.

These include:

- Work overload: when job demands exceed human limits.
- Too little control over work: due to rigid policies, micromanagement, or chaotic job conditions.
- Values conflict: where the requirements of the job conflict with one’s personal principles and values.

When your work and life balance with one another in harmony, burnout isn’t as much of a concern. However, depending on your work environment, overwork and burnout have the potential to creep back in if you don’t pay attention. And although it’s possible to fix burnout, it isn’t an easy task.

More mindfulness

Mindfulness is the ability to maintain your awareness and focus on what you’re doing at any given moment. One example of this is mindful breathing. However, achieving mindfulness is difficult. Especially if you’re distracted by other obligations and concerns.

Mindfulness is also difficult when you’re expected to be multitasking at work.

While working, you can achieve more mindfulness when you’re given the flexibility to manage your personal obligations while you accomplish your share of the workload. And, of course, it’s crucial that you get the support of your team when you need it.

What are the most common causes of poor work-life balance?
More than a quarter of full-time employees globally say it’s become more difficult to balance work and family in the last five years. The most common causes were:

- **Increased expenses without an increase in salary.** 1/3 of employees cited this as their top challenge to maintaining a work-life balance.
- **Increased responsibilities at work.** About half of millennials and Gen X participants cited additional work responsibilities as a leading cause of poor work-life balance.
- **Increased responsibility at home.** More than 40% of millennials and Gen X participants said more responsibility at home, such as caring for children and aging relatives, made it more challenging to balance work and personal life.
- **Working longer hours.** Almost half (46%) of managers work more than 40 hours each week, and 40% say their hours have increased over the past five years.
- **Having children.** Over a quarter (26%) of millennials said they are working more after having a child. 50% of women and 22% of men took a career break after having a child.
12 tips to improve your work-life balance

It’s one thing to talk about work-life balance. It’s another to achieve it.

Here are 12 practical tips for improving your sense of balance at work and at home.

Improving work-life balance at work

First, let’s look at some ways you can improve your work-life balance in the workplace.

1. Learn to say “no”

Learning how to say no can be one of the hardest soft skills for any dedicated professional to learn and put into practice. But it’s an important part of setting boundaries.

To start, you must first assess the typical demands of your day and learn to articulate and prioritize what you have on your plate.

A great tool to use for this exercise is the Eisenhower Matrix. (Hint: If you’re finding everything falling into the “Urgent-Important” quadrant, try this clever hack).

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It can be helpful to recognize that saying “no” to things that are less of a priority frees up time and energy to say “yes” and attend to other things that are important to you.

2. Take breaks

Even a 30-second microbreak can:

- Improve concentration
- Reduce stress
- Keep you feeling engaged
- Make your work feel more enjoyable

It’s especially important to be mindful of this when you’re working from home.

MIT senior lecturer Robert Pozen recommends taking a break every 75–90 minutes for 15 minutes. This will allow your brain to consolidate and retain learning.

A study by The Energy Project found people naturally go from full focus to physiological fatigue every 90 minutes.

3. Use your lunch break

If you have a lunch break at your place of work, it’s your right to use it.

This means you shouldn't be expected to always eat at your desk and work through lunch.
You can take this time to enjoy your meal mindfully. You can also do short meditations or breathing exercises if your stress levels are high or experience chronic stress.

4. Ask for flexibility

Having open, honest conversations about your needs and those of your employer and team can lead to productive solutions.

Those can include flextime, a compressed workweek schedule, job sharing, and other creative options.

5. Prioritize your health

Recognizing the importance of maintaining your physical health, emotional well-being, and mental fitness is the first step to making it a priority in your life.

Use the concept of habit stacking to build simple, supportive actions into your day. Consider habits like:

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6. Practice self-compassion

One of the most important ways to achieve a sense of work-life balance is to let go of perfectionism.

The approach of perfectionism may have brought some success during school and early career. But the stress it causes accumulates over time. The strain on our system and emotional resources increases as our responsibilities increase.

It’s important to recognize that life isn’t always easy. Everyone struggles, and you aren’t always going to get it “right.” Recognizing this truth allows you to create a shift toward a more compassionate growth-and-learning approach to work and life. This can help to support a sense of balance.

It can also provide an inspiring model for others who also need to hear this message.

Improving work-life balance at home

Now, let’s look at some ways you can improve your work-life balance at home.

7. Communicate boundaries so you can truly unplug

Set and communicate your work hours to your colleagues and customers so that you have clear boundaries. This should include when you’ll work and when you won’t be available to respond.

One simple way to achieve this is to set up an autoresponder to alert those who contact you via email that you are offline. This message can also let them know when you’ll respond.

This removes the pressure to keep checking work emails.
Consider setting up a system for key stakeholders to contact you in a true emergency so you can rest, knowing you’re not missing something critical.

8. Invest in relationships

Lack of strong relationships increases the risk of premature death from all causes by 50%. That’s nearly as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

On the flip side, solid connections and social support can improve health and increase longevity.

Make sure to spend your time nurturing relationships that matter to you. If you took the previous steps to unplug, then you’ll be able to give more attention to the people you spend your time with.

9. Make space in your schedule for family time

Block out some time that’s devoted entirely to your family.

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For this to work, everyone in your family needs to make this time a priority. Make sure you’re all on the same page. You all need to decide to take the necessary steps to carve this time out.

You can also set this time apart to call family members or other loved ones who live far away.

10. **Prioritize quality time**

Rather than spreading yourself so thin that nothing feels satisfying, identify what’s truly important to you.

A values exercise, or exploring your Ikigai, can be helpful ways to clarify and articulate this for yourself. Based on what you learn, take an honest look at how you spend your personal time. Which activities and relationships are life-enhancing and which are soul-sucking?

With this information in hand, define for yourself where you’ll devote your time. Make sure to prioritize high-value relationships and activities.
Don’t forget that one of those relationships is with yourself! When you have downtime, allow yourself to enjoy that quality time for yourself to re-energize.

**11. Start small**

Healthier behaviors can **support your sense of personal well-being**. These could be behaviors like staying active and or improving your eating habits. But those habits can be difficult to establish.

Who hasn’t experienced the New Year’s resolution that peters out by mid-February? Motivation alone isn’t enough to drive **behavior change**.

The other key ingredients for success are the ability to do the behavior and a dependable reminder that prompts us to do it. According to Tiny Habits author BJ Fogg, one way to succeed is to **make something so simple and so tiny that you have no excuse not to do it**. You’ll be able to do it even when you’re in a rush, if you’re sick, or when you’re distracted.

**12. Ask for help**

**High-achieving professionals** are often guilty of taking everything on themselves. They don’t want to “bother” anyone by asking for help.

Sometimes this is tied to identity (“I’m supposed to be the one who has it all together”) or feelings of obligation (“Who else will do it if I don’t?”).

Instead, consider that asking for help gives other people the gift of giving — and being part of a solution and support system. This builds the benefits of mutual relationships for all involved.

**Make healthy work-life balance a priority**

Creating work-life balance and integration is an ongoing and fluid process. You’ll constantly be learning and adapting as your interests and circumstances change over time. It’ll require honing key skills, like **time management skills**.

Let it be fun! And don’t forget to periodically revisit your priorities to see what’s changed. You’ll want to assess whether your priorities continue to line up with how you’re spending your time and energy.
Working with a BetterUp coach can help you align your priorities and achieve a work-life balance. Get a custom demo to see how it can work for you.