

Life balance and the law: An oxymoron?

Don't wait for a wake-up call. Learning to say "yes" to core values can promote a legitimate life balance

By Madelyn J. Chaber

We're shortly past the new year, a time when people often resolve to live healthier, spend more time with family and friends, become more spiritual, more organized, and a host of other "be better" resolutions. By now, many of these have been cast aside as the weight of the realities of a law practice and 21st century life takes over.

Most of us seem to live in an imbalanced state while searching for some kind of equilibrium in our lives. In fact, life balance is one of the most discussed topics in our culture. But it is also one of the most elusive.

I want to share with you some ideas about achieving life balance in spite of living the chaotic life that most of us have come to regard as normal. I would suggest that it is not too late to start. Indeed, it is never too late to live a more balanced life.

Law vs. balanced life

Is it possible to be a lawyer and have a balanced life? Or are balance and the law an oxymoron? Before I answer this question, let me ask you the following questions:

Are you a pessimist or an optimist?

Do you see the glass half empty or half full?

Do you want the bad news first or the good news?

How we view the world, and the perspectives we choose, has a huge influence on our actions and our happiness. As Harry Truman said, "A pessimist is one who makes difficulties of his opportunities and an optimist is one who makes opportunities of his difficulties."

The bad news

First, the bad news for you glass-half-empty people: the statistics aren't favorable. Since the 1990s, polls and surveys have found significant and high rates of lawyer dissatisfaction with their work. Perhaps of no surprise, lawyers have the highest rate of depression of more than 100 professions according to a study done at Johns Hopkins University, a rate that is more than four times the rate of the general population. And while approximately 20 to 25 percent of lawyers have symptoms consistent with depression, women suffer at twice the rate of men.

The struggle for balance appears on the relationship front as well. Lawyers divorce more frequently than non-attorneys. Women lawyers who get divorced are less likely to remarry than women doctors who divorce. For women lawyers, working more than 45 hours a week is a strong predictor of stress, and stress, in turn, contributes to increasing risks of infertility and miscarriage.

Substance abuse is twice as likely among attorneys compared to the general population. Roughly one in five lawyers is addicted to alcohol. Substance abuse accounts for 70 percent of attorney discipline cases and factors heavily in malpractice cases.

For today's lawyer, the stakes are high, the pressures real, and deadlines are constant. The amount of work is never-ending, the nature of the work is adversarial, and the hours are long. We're often at the mercy of clients, judges, juries, partners and firms and have little real control.

The angst of a trial is palpable. It takes many forms: delays, witness rescheduling or unavailability, responding to last minute briefs, incorrect rulings, designing effective graphics, equipment failure, selecting a jury, preparing your opening, your closing, and then waiting for the jury to return their verdict while you sit wondering, what if they don't care? What if I wasn't good enough?

Technology, designed to make our life easier, turns out to be a two-edged sword. It allows you to work anywhere and anytime. But, anywhere and anytime means weekends, late nights and on vacations.

No wonder as a group we're depressed, stressed, overworked and often disconnected from our families and friends. And many lawyers even after all the hard work of law school and passing the bar, have left the profession as evidenced by the high number of lawyers on inactive status.

The search for more balance often takes a wake-up call: a heart attack, a spouse leaving, a malpractice suit or disciplinary action or the death of a friend or loved one. For me, the wake-up call came when a much younger man, a defense lawyer I knew, my opposing counsel on many depositions and trials, died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving a wife and young children. What was I doing, I asked myself, spending nearly all my waking hours working, either in trial or getting ready for one, and hardly spending time with my family?

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I had reversed roles with my husband and was the family breadwinner while he took over the domestic roles (and very well I might add). After the death of my colleague, I vowed to quit my partnership and trial work, but *after* my next trial. It was almost too late. My husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer just days after my last day at work, and he died six months later. Instead of companion and playmate to my husband, I became a caregiver. My commitment to my clients and my cause cost me the precious six months before his diagnosis, time that I could never retrieve.

The good news

Have I depressed you yet? Well here's the good news: you get to write your own history. Reclaiming your time and living a more fulfilling life is a choice.

I'm not suggesting that you need to quit your job and go to the Himalayas on a spiritual quest. It turns out, you can be a lawyer and be happy. But first you have to figure out what your true priorities are, what your top values are and start honoring them. In fact, psychologists tell us nothing creates more internal stress and trauma than when what you are doing on the outside (your actions and behaviors) is incongruent with your values. Mahatma Gandhi said: "Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony."

Life balance, in my definition, is a feeling that we experience when we sense that we are paying attention to and managing all aspects of our lives – our work, our physical and emotional health, our spirituality and our relationships. More commonly, when asked about life balance most people talk about their work on the one hand and the rest of their lives on the other. The popular term "work-life balance" is a relatively new phrase, first coined in 1986. For the next 10 years, it was only referenced about 25 times in top newspapers around the world. Today if you Google the term on the Internet, you'd find over fifteen million references. The world has changed. And so can you!

Exercise

Absence of pain	Contribution	Independence	Professionalism
Abundance	Control	Integrity	Recognition
Achievement	Courage	Intimacy	Relationship
Accomplishment	Courtesy	Intuition	Reliability
Adventure	Creativity	Joy	Respect
Advocacy	Credibility	Justice	Romantic
Aggressiveness	Discipline	Laughter	Safety
Altruism	Discovery	Leadership	Satisfaction
Ambition	Dissension	Learning	Security
Approachability	Emotional Health	Loyalty	Self-care
Artistic expression	Empathy	Mindfulness	Self-control
Authenticity	Environmental	Nature	Self-expression
Autonomy	Excellence	Neatness	Self-love
Avoidance of conflict	Faith	Openness	Self-mastery
Balance	Family	Optimism	Self-protection
Beauty	Flexibility	Orderliness	Self-realization
Benevolence	Freedom	Partnership	Self-respect
Caring	Friendship	Peace	Sensuality
Cheerfulness	Fulfillment	Perceptiveness	Service
Choice	Fun	Personal growth	Spirituality
Clarity	Generosity	Physical appearance	Stability
Collaboration	Gratitude	Philanthropy	Tolerance
Commitment	Happiness	Play	Trust
Communication	Harmony	Pleasure	Truthfulness
Community	Holistic living	Power	Vitality
Competence	Honesty	Punctuality	
Connection	Humor	Privacy	

Balance is not a natural state. The world turns; the weather changes; time is moving. We constantly flow in and out of balance. Think about learning to ride a bicycle as a child, shifting your body until you reached that moment of perfect balance, when you could release your hold on the handlebars because you were so centered. The minute something changed your focus, a pothole in the road, a light changing from green to red, you had to grab those bars and realign yourself to regain balance.

Both balance and imbalance are dynamic states. However, consistently living life out of balance – at a frantic pace –

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comes with a price. I don't care how successful you are in your work, if your body is a wreck, nothing else matters. If you're overworked and overloaded, just like an electrical circuit, you'll burn out. Too many of us have ended up there.

The first step away from possible burnout is to become aware of whether "what you think, what you say, and what you do" are in harmony. Are you living what you believe in? Are you honoring the values you hold most dear? Are the values you care about most showing up the most often or are you out of sync?

An exercise to try

Here's an exercise that might help you determine the answers to these questions:

Begin by brainstorming a list of values with partners, colleagues, significant others and friends. Try to remove your judgment of whether the value is good or bad. For example, aggressiveness could be negative or positive depending on the situation. Sometimes others can see the values we hide or repress. (An example is on previous page). You can add to this list if your values are not on it.

Cross off the 10 values that do not resonate with you. Keep crossing off 10 until you are left with only the values to which you connect.

Now pick the top five values remaining on the list.

Prioritize them. Think about what is most important to you in each of your spheres, i.e. work, home, community.

Now compare these top five values to how you behave in your work, your home, with your friends, with your community.

Evaluate which of these values is not showing up in your life at all. Ask yourself, why not?

To the extent you value a quality, ask yourself: How can I get more of that in my life?

Take one positive action this week to incorporate this value. For example, if you value cooperation and it is not showing up, find one place to advance that value in some aspect of your life.

Repeat with one small step each week to incorporate one additional value in some aspect of your life.

> *The real mission you have in life is to make yourself happy, and in order to be happy, you have to look at what you believe, the way you judge yourself, the way you victimize yourself.*
>
> — Don Miguel Ruiz
> *The Meaning of Love*

The more you use your core values as an operating system, the better you will feel. Feeling good leads to more happiness. Studies have shown that happiness fuels success in all spheres of life. Happy workers have higher levels of productivity, perform better and are less likely to become burned out. Improving relationships at home, with co-workers and friends, enhances life satisfaction.

Happy attorneys may be rare, but they do not need to be an oxymoron. Often we're told to learn to say NO in order to have less on our plate. I would suggest that rather than saying NO, we should be saying YES. YES to what we value in each part of our life. YES to what is most important. YES to the people who are most important. YES to the feelings of joy and happiness. Saying YES with the full force and focus of someone who is in synchronicity with those values, people and feelings. By living your life according to your purpose, values and priorities, you'll experience greater peace and fulfillment.

My wake-up call occurred more than 20 years ago. That was the start of my life balance journey. I made changes in order to focus on my values and priorities. There have been many bumps and detours on the pathway to a more balanced life, a quest that will continue throughout my life. Life may not be perfectly balanced, but it will likely be happier and more fulfilled. Try it. Let me know how it is working.


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