



## Coping With Competing Devotions

These days, the ultimate question may not be “What is the meaning of life?” but simply, “Where do I find the time?”

Between our work and personal lives (family, friends, exercise, sports, hobbies, community commitments), most of us have seriously overbooked ourselves. We strive so hard to “have it all”—fantastic work and other service that we’re passionate about, and passionate home lives that we work hard to nurture.

But with so many competing devotions, so many passions we must feed, we most often find ourselves just plain pooped. The stress can lead to health problems, poor sleep and fatigue, which means we get even less done (or take less pleasure in what we do accomplish). Ultimately, frustration mounts, our relationships suffer, and we wonder what went wrong.

To break out of the out-of-balance cycle and achieve better balance between our competing devotions, consider some of the following techniques.

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## Know Your Priorities

The near universal advice in creating life balance is to start with some process of getting in touch with your priorities, which reflect your values. What are you about? What is really important to you? Without some sense of these priorities as an anchor, it is almost impossibly difficult to battle the buffeting of daily life that fractures your time.

## Take Care of Yourself

This is not a paean to the “me generation,” but a simple reality. Your ability to devote time and energy to the rest of your life ultimately depends upon your inner resources. A common trap is to feel selfish about taking time for yourself—to exercise, relax, enjoy a hobby, cook a special meal and, of course, to get enough sleep. So to avoid that feeling, we often place those activities lower in priority than taking care of the other obligations of our lives. But the low priority items often don’t happen and we end up feeling somewhere on the spectrum between self-righteousness and martyrdom. Either way, we aren’t taking care of ourselves.

## Schedule Creatively

In her book *Coming Up for Air: How to Build a Balanced Life in a Workaholic World*, author Beth Sawi offers numerous pragmatic approaches for building balance into your life when your job is absorbing every waking minute, and then some. Again, she starts with understanding your priorities to help arm yourself with the fortitude to make difficult changes. But to shore up that fortitude, Sawi, an expert on workaholism (and working for workaholic bosses) from her own life experience, recommends several scheduling techniques as a way of controlling your time at work.

One of these, for example, she calls “pulsing,” which is scheduling late nights at work on fixed days—say, Tuesdays and Thursdays—so that you protect the other nights. When a special assignment comes up, you already know you have extra time blocked out and can better resist the temptation to tackle it on an ad hoc basis.

The “off” nights can also be pre-scheduled—for a weekly dinner out with your spouse, for example—to help build in the balance for the rest of what’s important to your life.

## Start With Your “To-Do” List

Productivity guru David Allen is one of the few writers in the field who takes a fundamentally different view of the “priorities first” approach. Instead of starting with priorities, he recommends in his book *Getting Things Done* that you start with your “in box”—by which he means everything on your current list of things to do. *Everything*. He says a typical person has 200-300 tasks floating around in their lives—in their head, on little slips of paper squirreled away in various places, in their organizer (or backed up in their email inbox), on post-it notes stuck to their computer screen, and so on. This backlog of tasks uses up too much of your brain—which is poorly equipped to organize this kind of list—and creates unnecessary stress.

But Allen doesn’t suggest that you prioritize these to-dos at all: Fixing the dripping faucet goes on the list right next to planning for the kids’ college education. The key to Allen’s system is getting all the to-dos out of your head and into some trusted system so you don’t have to worry about forgetting them. With your head clear, your instincts take over and you will find that the right things are getting done.

Allen definitely recommends reviewing your life from various “altitudes”—from your vision for the coming year to your vision for your whole life—to get in touch with your priorities and your goals for balance in your life...but only after you have control of that in-box.

With your mind clear, you can step back and take stock of your life. Your creative juices will be flowing to help you find that delicious state of grace in which your devotions at work and at home actually enhance each other, not deplete each other.