

...have a balanced life in academia



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Ha, this is a good question and there is no easy answer to it! For we are talking about individualized solutions to a structural problem:

First of all, being a scientist is a profession where there will always be more work than you can actually do. And a lot of the questions and tasks are genuinely exciting and worth your while!

Second, there is an enormous pressure to perform in science, which also implies that overtime is normalized. A load of overtime hours is seen as expressing your high level of commitment. Research as a part-time job 'doesn't work at all' or at most for people with children, but even then only temporarily. Such beliefs do abound in the academic system, and many scientists have internalized them in the course of their careers.

Third, maintaining life balance is closely linked to the issue of self-worth. On the one hand, we establish self-worth through 'being useful' or 'being needed'. On the other hand, it's about deep (organizational) cultural beliefs, norms, and attitudes about productivity, pleasure, and laziness. When are people 'valuable' to a society? How much 'enjoyment' is appropriate?

Fourth, establishing a work life balance is touching existential fears and realities, e. g. about

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employment or contract renewal – for internationals, this often also affects their residence status. Especially for PhD candidates/post docs who are highly dependent on their supervisors the room for negotiations seems to be tiny.

Fifth, developments in information technology have further blurred the boundaries between private and professional life and created the expectation of permanent availability and accessibility. Tools of this Working World 4.0, such as the home office, allow more room for individual work arrangements and flexibility. However, they also require a significantly higher degree of self-control.

I think it is high time that we as a society should investigate our beliefs on „productivity” and that the academic institutions in Germany have a responsibility for the well-being of their employees (especially now, that we see an increase in burn out, depression and other (mental) health problems – not only in society in general but also in Academia - due to Corona and the other global and regional crises). That said, here we will focus on you as an individual taking responsibility for your life and well-being to create your 'life balance'. The following strategies will help you:

Get your priorities straight and make a plan

First of all, you have to think about what your priorities in your life are: professional AND personal AND in regard to your values. How does the PhD/postdoc project fit in with these? What else is important? How high is the price you are willing to pay?

And how do you want your work day to look like: highly structured or with freedom to idle about? These priorities are highly individual and you can translate them into plans, if you find that helpful (→ Planning and Time Management might be a good topic for another time!). So, YOUR priorities should be YOUR compass for the decisions you make in order to balance YOUR life.

Be realistic and create your own schedule

We often connect a well-balanced life with regular working hours. This is not a bad idea per se. Rhythm, rituals and fixed times have been shown to support a good life balance. However, depending on your research regular working hours may be out of the question. Your tasks might actually require you to come in at the weekend. Or there are nights/weekends you work through because you want to finish a presentation or a paper. This is not a problem if it only happens now and then and you find other time to relax. It only becomes dangerous if this is 'normalized'. Thus, it might help to track your working hours for a month to figure out, how 'normal' it is for you to have completely boundless working hours.

Balancing Energy

Instead on purely focusing on how much time you spend working or not working, it might be useful to also look at what gives you energy and what takes energy away from you. Certain things may give you a lot of pleasure at work and others that drain you in your private life. The trick is to identify energy sources and energy sinks and to reduce the latter. Of course, you may always have to cope with energy sinks, but make sure, that before and after you also do things that replenish your energy.

Identify your 'wriggle room'

Resilience studies show that it is important to discriminate between things that you can actually change and those where this is (currently) impossible and to accept that as a fact of life. Focusing your energy and actions on what is in your own hand will give you agency, whereas running against the same wall over and over will very likely drain you. (If you want to change 'the system' anyway, organize yourselves in groups and start political campaigns – which I personally would find great!).

An example: If your supervisor/PI gives you too many tasks and you feel treated unfairly, this may well be true. Nevertheless, to wait for your supervisor/PI to change on their own is a strategy that will only frustrate you. What you can do e. g. is giving feedback on what you find doable and what is not realistically doable.

Saying NO

Saying 'no' – a key strategy for maintaining balance – is often linked to disappointing your own, social and/or job role-specific expectations. Ask yourself: "*When do I personally find it difficult (or easy) to disappoint expectations and why?*" What personal beliefs (such as "*If I say 'no,' I might be perceived as selfish/not collegial/incapable/I'll miss an important project*") sound familiar you? Critically investigate your beliefs whether they are actually relevant/realistic in the current situation. It helps to give yourself time to think about this. Consciously dealing with your beliefs can enable you to evaluate requests more objectively in relation to your goals and priorities. Two thoughts may be helpful: First, in a hierarchical system, saying "NO" (or at least not "YES" immediately)

might enhance your visibility and your acceptance as 'one of them' to a greater degree than saying "YES" all the time to what is often taken for granted, since this latter behavior leaves you invisible (even if that seems counter-intuitive). And second, think about what you are freeing space for if you say "NO".

Last but not least: The burnout warning signs

Stress is not the same as stress: we can be stressed as a part of life, but it also can become chronic and pathological: the burnout syndrome. Signs can be: you are more afraid than usual; you are constantly short tempered with people that you value; you are feeling guilty; you cannot sleep; you are confused and unable to concentrate; you are often ill; you feel drained; your motivation has evaporated. **IMPORTANT:** Burnout can present in many ways – if you recognize symptoms, consult a specialist without delay, only they can diagnose.

If you have topics for the „how to“ section we have not yet touched, please email to jGfV@GfV.org.