



The Myth of “Work-Life Balance”

Myth: An unfounded or false notion

By Patricia O’Connell, Contributor

The idea of “work-life balance” is one that needs to be abandoned, according to a panel discussion, “Finding Personal Zen,” Stephens INVESTED recently held. The panel explored why work-life balance is indeed a myth, generational differences in attitudes around work and life, and strategies for finding greater satisfaction in both one’s personal and professional lives.

The discussion was moderated by Alyssa Abkowitz, Vice President, Content at the NeuroLeadership Institute and participants included Dr. Wendy Ward, associate provost at UAMS, Dr. Emily Sarro of the NeuroLeadership Institute, Kathy Bryant, Chief Financial Officer of Stephens Capital Partners, and Holly Lenderman, Vice President, Senior Marketing Communications Manager, Stephens Inc.

Based on research as well as personal experience Dr. Ward asserted that work-life balance is “unattainable,” characterizing attempts to achieve it as being “a clown standing on a big round ball juggling and trying not to fall off.”

While its unattainability unfairly sets women up for feelings of inadequacy and guilt, more dangerous, Dr. Ward added is that “it pits work against home, meaning that one is bad – work – which is encroaching upon home, which is good.” The reality is in both environments there are stressors as well as the potential for joy, satisfaction, and passion. “We’ve moved more toward a concept of integration,” she said. “You can have things that nurture your soul...in both environments and they can work in synergy together.”

Like many things, that synergy, or integration, is simple in theory, but can be difficult in practice, for both practical reasons – everyone seems to have too much to do – and because of the science behind brain function and cognition. An “optimal mindset” is achieved by having the seven ingredients of what the NeuroLeadership Institute calls “The Healthy Mind Platter”:

- Sleep Time
- Physical Time
- Focus Time
- Connecting Time
- Time In
- Down Time
- Play Time

All seven are critical for being able to perform at one’s best. Dr. Sarro identified “Time In,” “Down Time,” and “Play Time” (as defined by the Institute) as being often misunderstood and neglected – something she admitted can be an issue in her own life.

“Time In” is about focusing inward – perhaps with mindfulness or meditation. Dr. Sarro stressed that “intentional focus” doesn’t need to take a lot of time, but it helps boost what she calls “emotional regulation skills” and can help target and cope with anxiety-producing environments and situations. “The brain science suggests that [intentional focus] targets brain areas that specifically women use in in these stressful environments,” she said.

“Down Time,” too, requires intent, and may not be what we typically think of when we hear the phrase. Dr. Sarro described it as “inactivity” – literally freeing the mind to wander – which she says is critical to problem-solving. It shouldn’t be confused with engaging in a hobby. While that may be relaxing, it’s still an activity – the opposite of what is needed. Even just 10 minutes a day can be restorative, she said.

Finally, she emphasized that “Play Time” isn’t just for children. For adults, it’s about being able to act on curiosity, which in turn has been linked to innovation, learning, and the feeling of reward that learning brings about. Anything that brings a sense of reward is something we’re likely to return to, which is why acting on curiosity and the subsequent benefits of learning and being innovative are so important.

Bryant and Lenderman shared their own experiences and lessons learned. For her part, Bryant says she was extremely focused on work until her late 30s, when she married and soon after had a child, so work-life balance wasn’t something she gave a lot of thought to until then; work clearly won out. She acknowledged that the greater emphasis on home life after her child was born required a strong support system that included not just her husband, but senior leaders sympathetic to her need for great flexibility.

Lenderman’s story is quite different from Bryant’s. She had children early in her marriage, so she was accustomed to trying to juggle numerous

priorities from almost the beginning of her career at Stephens. Both satisfying and challenging was navigating the new responsibilities that came with a promotion during Covid. Trying to fill her “platter” with the seven ingredients that Dr. Sarro emphasized can still feel challenging, she admits.

The disparities in attitudes about work-life balance are often stark among people of different generations. While Dr. Ward, who recruits widely for various programs, is hesitant to blanket every member of a generation with stereotypical traits, she admits the differences she sees between Generation X and Millennials are dramatic. Dr. Ward credits the concerns expressed by many Millennials around issues like wellness, work hours, and strong boundaries around personal time for helping to change practices for everyone in workplaces, including UAMS.

The concept of self-care – what constituted it, and why it is critical – generated discussion. While Abkowitz noted that the phrase is often associated with external activities – massages, spa days, and the like – the panel uniformly agreed that it’s a much more internal process, with the ultimate goal of having compassion for oneself.

Dr. Ward pointed out that this is especially important as we navigate what she described at the “prolonged trauma” of the pandemic. Dr. Sarro noted that women are known to score lower than men in around self-compassion and to be more judgmental about themselves.

Peppered throughout the session were questions from participants – ranging from how to establish boundaries with a boss without being offensive to how much of one’s personal life should be revealed to co-workers – which generated responses that helped form valuable advice for achieving and attaining greater happiness and satisfaction overall.

The over-arching message: work-life balance may not be attainable but deriving happiness from each area of one’s life is. Awareness is the first step; action and intent are required; and wellness – physical and mental – is not a luxury but a necessity.

10 Tips for Getting the Best from Work and Life

- 1. Adapt a growth mindset.** Among the kinds of growth people can experience after trauma (i.e. the pandemic) are closer personal relationships, deeper spiritualism, greater appreciation of life in general, recognition of specific opportunities, and a sense of one’s own resilience.
- 2. Adopt a “SMART approach” to creating habits.** That means your goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-sensitive, according to Dr. Ward.
- 3. Set small goals.** Breaking large goals into smaller ones means that you’ll experience a sense of accomplishment and reward more often. Given that we gravitate toward rewards and what feels good, accomplishing a series of smaller goals will help you reach the larger one not only more easily, but with more confidence.
- 4. Understand the power of “yet.”** Instead of focusing on what you can’t do or don’t do but nevertheless aspire to, think of it as you aren’t where you want to be yet. That opens you up to thinking in a positive way and being aware of possibilities, rather than focusing on what you think of as failure and negativity.
- 5. Make deposits in “the bank.”** You get people’s trust and good will by earning it – going the extra distance, putting in additional effort, being reliable, and of course, doing good work. This is especially important at work, because those behaviors create a type of capital that you can “draw on” when you need it, most likely for something related to life outside of work.
- 6. Establish boundaries.** There’s a seeming paradox in recognizing that work-life balance doesn’t exist but the need for boundaries does. If you’ve made the “deposits,” setting boundaries will seem more like an exchange that both parties participate in rather than creating walls that separate people.
- 7. Find your sources of support.** Support comes in many forms and from different places and is really defined by what you need at a given time. Support can be the inspiration you get from role models; the help you get with specific tasks; the feeling of community from being around like-minded people. Don’t expect it only from a spouse/partner or family and friends; co-workers can be a strong source of support as well.
- 8. Stop apologizing so much.** Constantly apologizing creates a sense of guilt, of hyper-responsibility, and sets us up to have unrealistic expectations about ourselves. It can also cause people to see us in a less-positive light. Nobody gets it right all the time and things go wrong. If we can convince people we’re truly trying, the situation is seldom as serious – and apology worthy – as we think.
- 9. See prioritizing as a dynamic, not static process.** It’s well-known that most New Year’s resolutions fail, in part because people use this one time of the year to decide to make too many changes, or changes that are too big. Better to assess priorities on a regular basis – for some people that’s quarterly; for others, it might be monthly. Also, as things change in your life and you make progress, you should reassess. It’s also ok to abandon goals that no longer make sense.
- 10. Don’t be afraid to say “no.”** People likely have gotten a stronger sense of what matters to them throughout the pandemic. That should be accompanied by the willingness and courage to act accordingly, and sometimes the appropriate action is to say no.

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