

Crabby's recipe for balancing your work and your life



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Crabby Office Lady

Life is a juggling act. Work, home, the family, the errands ... We all sometimes feel like hamsters on their wheels. This week I'm going to suggest a few ways to get some balance back into your lives.

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Type "work life balance" into a search engine and you're likely to come up with thousands upon thousands of results. It's become somewhat of a buzz phrase and for good reason: Many of us are working longer hours during the week (and sometimes even on our "days off"), spending more time commuting, driving our kids hither and yon (and even to outer yon), taking care of our aging parents (who can still make us feel as if we're 12), eating on the go, and definitely not getting enough sleep. I don't know how all of us can continue at that pace; I honestly don't think we can.

Wouldn't it be great if you could just swallow a pill and make it all better? Sorry, haven't got one. But let's see if I can't come up with a tasty, healthy, and well-proportioned recipe to help you get started on finding some of that elusive balance back into your life.

The ingredients: Crabby's working person's balance recipe

This is a recipe for a special sort of endurance bar. (Bet you eat a lot of those as you dash around.) It's not a fix-all that will ensure supreme physical conditioning nor is it a panacea for emotional/mental discombobulation. I am not a personal trainer and I am not a psychotherapist (nor do I play one on the Web). It's merely a ... *suggestion* for how to get that balance ball rolling.

2 level cups of organization

Getting organized will not only serve you in your quest for balance, but it will also make you feel better. Frankly, in my mind, organization is the mood-elevating ingredient of the year. Note however that you should not add this ingredient to overflowing or it will overpower the rest of the recipe. I do understand that "organization" means different things to different people, depending on circumstances. But it basically comes down to a few things to think about:

- Get yourself organized at work so that you are more efficient. Efficiency means that you'll spend less time chasing your tail, right? (Unless you're Ry, the Crabby Office Dog, who does this just for pleasure.) Outlook is a great place to start: [Audio course: So that's how! Great Outlook features to organize your Inbox](#)
- Organizing your home life — whether it has to do with the kids' activities, mealtimes, or your precious personal time — is as important as being organized at work. A little planning can go a long way. For example, using a [Home maintenance schedule](#) can help ensure that you don't freak out and have to run to the hardware store the moment you realize that you haven't changed your furnace's filter in three years. (And you wondered if you had allergies — no, just dust and sloughed skin cells. Neat, huh?) And how about a [weekly meal planner](#) to help you with the dreaded question, the one that makes your spirits flag and your appetite disappear: "What should I make for dinner?"
- And finally, you may think of yourself as a free spirit, but if you have a job, a family, and a house to run, you may need to rein in some of that spirit and use your new-found organization skills to make sure that you get some time for YOU. That's right: YOU. Carve out time to do some of the things you like to do. All work and no play makes Crabby a dull girl (work hard, play hard sharpens my pencil).

And you can shop for this ingredient right at your computer. Do a search for "organize" and Office Online will come up with endless tips and strategies.

1/2 cup of time management, 1 tablespoon priority setting

You can be as organized as you like, but if you don't figure out what happens when and in what order, you may find your desk at work littered with meal planners and your at-home bathroom reading consisting of budget forecasts. Time management can be compared to money management: You need to figure out what to focus on, and what's going to give you the best return for what you spend, at work or at home.

For example, when you're at work, create a schedule — whether it's in Outlook or written on a piece of paper — that details what must be done, what should be done (and in what timeframe), and what can be done (but can wait). This is where that small amount of priority setting comes in. Use as much as you need but not so much that it's all you taste ...

When you're away from your job, with your family and friends, having a to-do time management/priority list may seem a bit over the top. But, for example, if you have kids who are going to soccer, gymnastics, violin lessons, tribal drumming lessons, and drama class, ask yourself and them if they really need (not to mention want) to be doing all of those activities. I realize that it's the thing to do now, get your kids involved in every aspect of sports, science, music, and whatnot. But I can tell you from experience (yes, Crabby was young once too) that burnout can happen at an early age. Sit everyone down and make them prioritize their activities. Once you have that list, create a working schedule for them and for yourself (so that you get some time for your activities, too). Just hanging out in the backyard and watching the clouds go by isn't a bad way to spend some time ...

Time management also means that when you're at work, your brain is at work. And when you're at home, it's at home. Become a split personality! Enjoy yourselves.

1/3 cup of delegation

You're a doer — not just a talker — and everyone knows that about you. You're a multi-tasking whiz kid, burning the midnight oil, taking the heat when the office goes up in flames, and then putting out that fire. See, I used to be like that too. But then my family grew, and, well, you do learn from your children. What I learned was 1) I didn't need to do all of it all the time all by myself and 2) Not only was I was stealing the thunder from my coworkers, I was also woefully underutilizing their considerable talents. So I learned the D word: Delegation.

Delegating at work doesn't simply mean putting someone as a delegate to your Outlook Inbox. It can mean:

- Giving your delegates permissions to certain folders on your computer.
- Creating a SharePoint site so that everyone you've brought into a project has access to all the necessary information.
- Assigning tasks with due dates. (Be careful with this one. Unless you're the boss, firing off your tasks with an end date to your peers can truly backfire on you.)

And of course, you can (and should) delegate at home, too. When your kids are old enough, they can take on some of the chores, right? Carry dishes to the kitchen, sort their laundry, take a class at massage school ... But seriously, delegating at home may be even harder than doing it at work. Kids (and too often spouses) carry with them, a certain sense of, shall we say ...*entitlement*. Well it's time to nip that in the bud (or if need be in full flower) and get some help with your load. Teenagers who drive can help out with the errands and chauffeuring the littler ones around. Carpooling is must. Teaching a 12-year-old to cook, a great idea. It may take a village to raise a child but it takes a heckuva lot of work — and help — to run a sane household. Hey, how about a recipe book template? Could you use a work-based allowance chart? (Now you're thinking!)

2 medium-sized cloves of talking to your boss

I have a very approachable boss who has a family of her own and so it's pretty easy for me to talk to her. Maybe you do and maybe you don't (hence only two cloves — no need to overpower him or her). Perhaps it's time to think about scaling back a bit, maybe keeping your job but on a part-time basis. Or perhaps you can request flexible hours. Microsoft is great with this; the company is reasonable about the hours we put in and when we do it, and lots of folks job-share (except that no one seems to want to job-share with good old Crabby. Huh. Guess I'm unique).

Managers are people too (No! Really!) and chances are, they're struggling with this balancing act too. Request some time with your boss, sit down, and spill your guts. Let him or her know you're feeling more than a tad overwhelmed and would like some input. Your manager will be interested to discover that it's stress that is giving you that hollow-eyed look, not Goth eye makeup.

A dash of simplification

In a word, calm. In two words, slow down. No one is going to vote you off the island, even if you can't make fire or catch a fish with your bare hands. (Thank you Writer's Guild of America for ensuring my complete and shameful addiction to reality TV.) If you need to cut back on what you do, that's why you made a priorities list and talked to your boss. Your life and well-being is worth more than universal praise and admiration, believe me. (And I know about praise and admiration.)

Optional: One to two shavings of considering a new job

Finally, if you've tried it all — the organizing, the time management, the priorities setting, the delegating, the explaining to your boss — and you still feel as if you're stuck in a permanent spin cycle, perhaps it's time to turn everything on its head and figure out if this is the job for you. Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Maybe your priorities have changed. If so, think long and hard about how much you're willing to grind yourself down just for the sake of a buck.

Directions

When I am following a recipe, this is the point — putting it all together — where I stray. I mean, I've gathered the ingredients, they're sitting expectantly on the counter, and all my pots and pans are waiting in formation on the stovetop. But somehow, once I start using them, the execution of the literal directions tends to go awry. However (and this is a big however), I've learned that going exactly step by step isn't always all that important (unless it's a tricky soufflé you're attempting). So, this week I have an additional quotation for you: "Cookery is not chemistry. It is an art. It requires instinct and taste rather than exact measurements." (Marcel Boulestin, chef and author of several cookbooks.) What I'm trying to say is that you need to pick and choose which cooking directions — and even ingredients — will suit your particular palate and needs for the banquet that is life.

- Preheat oven to 98.6 degrees. Any hotter and this won't work. Flaring tempers just burn it.
- Mix all the ingredients well and consider their particular qualities before adding them to the mix.
- Change recipe at your discretion. People are like snowflakes: no one is exactly the same.
- Bake until consistency feels right. Be sure to taste before serving.

I feel honor-bound to tell you, at the close of this column, that I am by no means an expert in the art of work-life balance. I've been trying to improve, and my situation as a full-time telecommuter has enabled me to get it better under control. As well, working for a company that prides itself on paying attention to its employees' needs has helped. But when you have a home office five steps from the living room, well, you see what I'm saying.

But honestly, even crabby ladies need to look themselves straight in the mirror and figure out what's working and what isn't. And so now that I've advised you to do it, I'll do the same.

"I was thirty-two when I started cooking; up until then, I just ate." — Julia Child

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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