

It's not easy to keep up with the demands of work and family and to find time for oneself, too.

The price we pay for working too much, giving too little time to our kids and neglecting our need for personal "down" time is devastating. Life seems out of control, peace of mind is a foreign concept and our bodies look and feel like a bundle of worn out rags.

But it is possible to achieve a reasonable balance between work, family and self. Of course, there will be days or weeks when the balance gets skewed — that's just part of life. However, spending some time thinking about what's important and how to honor those things will help you accomplish more and still have time for significant people in your life and activities that are fulfilling and fun.

Making choices makes time

We all have about 112-119 hours of "awake" time a week. (Sleep takes up about 49-56 hours a week.) The average work week is about 40 hours. That leaves approximately 72 hours a week to manage in ways you choose.

So what are you doing with your time? Are you overcommitted in one area? If so, brainstorm for ways to minimize the time spent there. For example, can your spouse take the children to daycare and you pick them up, thereby giving you more time in the morning? Are you doing too much when others could be helping? Can chores be delegated to other family members? Take time to teach younger children how to perform simple tasks that are time-consuming for you but will teach them responsibility and build their self-esteem and sense of competency. The payoff for the time spent teaching will be enormous.

Are you taking on projects at work at the expense of your family or personal time? You may need to learn the art of saying "no." It can be done with grace and firmness — and without jeopardizing your job. Check the time-management section of bookstores or libraries for self-help guides on this topic.

Deciding what's important

To realistically distribute time among the various areas of your life, it's necessary to take some time up front to decide what's really important in your life. Ask yourself, "On what am I spending more time than I want to?" "On what would I rather spend my time?"

The following tool will help you identify what's really important — the first step in gaining control over your own time. Many times we do things that feel necessary at the moment but in the grand scheme are not important at all. To get more time for the things you want to do, identify the activities that are eating your time and either stop doing them, hire someone to do them or delegate them to someone else.

The four-square grid at right is fully explained in *First Things First* (Simon & Schuster), a practical time-management book by Rebecca R. Merrill, A. Roger Merrill and Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

In Quadrant I write down things that are urgent and important. For example:

- Crises (a hurt child needs help)
- Pressing problems (the washing machine is broken and needs repair)
- Deadline-driven projects (the auto insurance expires in a week and you want to find a better rate with another company)
- Preparations for imminent events (a meeting with the boss tomorrow)

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	I	II
NOT IMPORTANT	III	IV

In Quadrant II note things that are important but not urgent. For example:

- Preparation for future events/planning
- Anticipate and prevent problems
- Values clarification
- Increasing skills (classes, reading)
- Relationship building
- Healthy recreation

In Quadrant III note things that are not important but seem urgent. Covey calls this the "Quadrant of Deception" because the activities in it might seem important at first glance, but when they're realistically evaluated, it's clear they are important only to someone else. For example:

- Interruptions to planned work time
- Some meetings (would a phone call net the same result?)
- Many popular activities

It is possible to simply not allow others to use your time by being polite but firm in refusing a request to do something or deflecting an interruption or by not doing certain things — making homemade cookies when buying

cookies you know the kids like would serve just fine. It is in this quadrant that you can “make” time for activities that are more important. For example, turn off a favorite TV show and play a game with your children or talk to your spouse as you listen to music you both like.

In Quadrant IV jot down activities that are not important and not urgent. For example:

- Trivia, busywork
- Junk mail (don't open or read it if it's obviously an advertisement)
- Some phone calls (a friend calls for the third time in one day just to talk)
- “Escape” activities (“mindless” TV shows)

Many people spend most of their time in Quadrants I and III, driven by a sense of urgency. But only some things are truly urgent. When we live in Quadrant's I and II, satisfaction and a feeling of confident control over one's life are achieved by doing things we feel are important, such as spending time with children or mates. When not enough of the important things are getting done, we feel stressed and our lives may seem out of control.

A blueprint for time

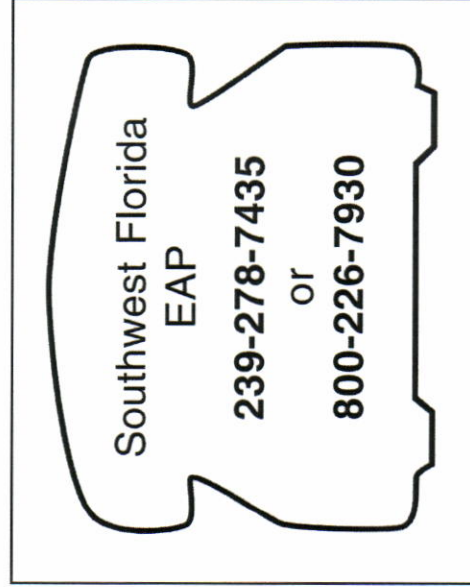
Now that you have a sense of what is and isn't important, provide yourself with a blueprint for each day, week, month, year. This is much easier than it sounds. Use simple “to-do” lists for each time period (day, week, etc.) and prioritize them with a I or II as determined by the choices you made in your four-square grid. Act on them accordingly. And remember, these are “living” documents. Add items, scratch them out, move items from one list to another as deadlines draw near. Keep them with you and continuously update them.

Be flexible, allow for change

Setting priorities and becoming organized is important, but things come up: children get sick, work schedules change — life isn't predictable. So, stay flexible. And don't allow frustration to derail you. Have back-up plans. If you allow that changes are inevitable, you're more likely to be successful at your balancing act.

Help is available

Just talking about your problems sometimes leads to new solutions. If you or someone you know needs information, guidance or help, contact the resource and number listed below or look online for local professionals who can help.



BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY