

Work-life Balance By David Baldwin

LifeConnect Director and Clinical Psychologist, David Baldwin explains why having a sense of purpose is critical to achieving work-life balance. Drawing on the experiences of the director of a large engineering company he describes how they worked together in therapy to regain control of his life. The exercises outlined allowed for more creative thinking and inspiration as well as a decline in anxiety.

Some years ago the director of a large international engineering company came to see me. He had a spectacular career, over a span of some twenty-five years. He worked his way up from the shop floor working a lathe, to a respected position on the board guiding the company forward. On his journey he had put himself through university and taken away degrees in engineering and science, while working an arduous and demanding job. He spoke proudly about his achievements, how he had influenced the direction of the company, reorganised management and contributed to the current success of the firm.

The reason he came to see me was that he was three months away from retirement and simply terrified about what the future held for him. He tried to quell his anxiety and panic attacks by planning as many new activities and diversions as he could. As an engineer and manager he was used to solving problems, so he was deeply disturbed that he could not solve this, in his view, unnecessary distress and agitation.

His story has a happy ending but it was not without immense inner struggle in learning to relate to himself and the world around him quite differently. His story is also a common one, although there are many individual variations.

Harry (our director – but not his real name) had devoted himself to his career. Social life and interests were lived vicariously through his wife and his children. But to say that his life was unbalanced, while true, was also an oversimplification. More interests and activities did not in itself remedy his situation. As we worked through his biography it became clear that the anxiety had been there for quite some time, but well masked by his formidable activity and the demands of his work.

In order to improve the situation of poor life balance quickly and concretely, the following technique can be used. Look at the time spent on activities relative to an ideal balance based on interests and needs.

This can be done by drawing up an inventory of interests in the areas such as:

- leisure and recreational time
- social activities
- work interests
- spiritual interests
- health and wellbeing
- home and family
- personal space

Just seeing how time, effort and resources are allocated to each of these areas can be helpful in realignment towards a greater balance. However it is sometimes important to look deeper than this. It is difficult to feel a sense of balance in life without a sense of personal meaning.

Cultivating personal meaning takes time, and presence of mind. The following are some of the exercises Harry and I worked on:

1. At least once a year take stock of your personal situation. Consider what you have achieved and what you have left undone, what life has brought you and what you have made of it? Look honestly at the current state of all your important relationships.
2. Take time to reflect on your learning and knowledge, whether from life or from formal education and training. What might you still want to learn?
3. Cultivate interest, not just new interests or hobbies, but cultivate interest itself.
4. At least every three years take time to dream about the future, and anchor the dreams into goals, which are regularly reality tested. Attempt to understand what really motivates you. This is more difficult to accomplish than it sounds. But the reward is more purposeful action.

Of course there is no magic formula. But all of the above exercises have been thoroughly 'road tested'. These exercises have proven useful to people wishing to take greater command over their lives.