CLINICAL PRACTICE

Work-life balance: The importance of time management, working efficiently and self-care

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ABSTRACT

As nursing faculty, we have numerous demands and expectations at work, and we often have just as many in our personal lives. How do we get everything done? How do we meet all of the expectations of others? How do we make time for ourselves and recharge our energy levels? In this article we discuss simple strategies nursing faculty may use for achieving greater work-life balance. These range from identifying and prioritizing our to-do lists, protecting our time and schedules, being more efficient at work, and perhaps most important, engaging in effective self-care practices to help us recharge and balance all areas of our lives.

Key Words: Work-life balance, Self-care, Relationships, Time management, Working efficiently

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the many challenges for us as nursing faculty is the ability to balance work and life. A major contributing factor is that in today's world, productivity is often prioritized over self-care. On average, faculty work over 56 hours per week.[1] As nursing faculty, we must be prepared to serve as advisors, mentors, researchers, writers and educators, among many other roles. We must be able to balance academic pressures, collegial relationships, sometimes stressful working conditions, in addition to relationships and demands in our personal lives. Juggling all of these many responsibilities can become overwhelming.

Studies have found that work overload, in conjunction with emotional exhaustion, can result in burnout syndrome.[2] The demands on faculty can lead to high stress levels, which may affect achievement of work-life balance.[3] The interest in work-life balance has grown rapidly since the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people began working remotely from home full-time or part-time. The lines between work and personal life became blurred, and this contributed to feelings of work consuming too much of one's life.[4]

It is a common misperception that we must divide our time equally between work and our personal life. Rather than looking at our work and personal lives as two competing halves, a better approach is to view life as a whole. The concept of a "Wheel of Life" was created by Paul J. Meter, and represents various components of an individual's whole life. Components of the wheel may include areas such as career, family, friends, health, and leisure, to name just a few.[5] When one part of our life takes over and the others are neglected, our wheel becomes unbalanced.

Having awareness of our priorities allows us to re-shift our focus to what is most important, or in other words, rebalance our Wheel of Life. It is essential for us to be self-aware and know our boundaries and limitations, and periodically evaluating our self allows us to know our goals, desires, needs,

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and wants. When we do not know these, it can be difficult to achieve balance, but also happiness and inner peace.

Work-life balance has been operationally defined as "having sufficient time, energy and resources to meet the commitments of home and work".[6] In this article, we focus on two of these variables: time and energy. Time is a fixed construct, and we cannot create more time. How do we effectively utilize the time we have? Energy may not be finite, so how do we maximize our energy and re-charge ourselves? In this article, effective strategies for better managing time, working more efficiently, and practicing self-care to have greater energy, will be explored.

2. STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING TIME

Since time is finite, it is a valuable resource. There are measurable benefits to practicing good time management strategies, and these include staying motivated, being organized, prioritizing tasks, and meeting time-sensitive deadlines.[7] The concept of time management is commonly applied to our professional lives, but it can also be applied to our personal lives. Utilizing a to-do list is a basic and effective time management tool. Whether we utilize a daily, weekly, or monthly to-do list, or use a digital or paper version, depends on our personal preferences. However, for any to-do list system to work, it is best reviewed daily.[7] This allows us to continuously rank the items on our to-do list in order of importance and urgency. Reviewing the list daily also helps us remember all of the tasks and projects we are managing.

The importance of a task is determined by its significance and value to our goals, and the urgency is usually determined by whether or not something needs immediate attention or has a specific deadline. Tasks can be prioritized based on importance and urgency using the following four categories: 1.) urgent and important; 2.) not urgent but important; 3.) urgent but not important; and, 4.) not urgent and not important.[8] Urgent and important tasks will receive the highest priority on our to-do list, and those not urgent and not important will receive lowest priority.

We may need to create separate to-do lists for different projects or goals depending on the number of tasks involved. Each day, the objective is to complete the tasks or activities identified as most important. We may only be able to complete 3-5 important tasks each day, and that is fine. Having a prioritized to-do list also allows us to set boundaries, and to say no to activities that may not align with our goals. Focusing on the most important activities allows us to gain greater control over our time, complete higher priority tasks, reflect on our work progress and even reduce anxiety.[7]

Scheduling our time is important, and like our to-do list, our

schedule or calendar may be in a digital or paper format. It needs to be realistic and reflect our plans for each day. Our schedule may have predetermined blocks of time for class, office hours or committee meetings, so we must work around these commitments to schedule time for completing tasks on our to-do list. We must protect this time and set boundaries, if not, others will begin to determine our priorities.

Blocking out time for completing our most important and urgent tasks first is important. We need to also think about the nature of each task, how much time each one may take to complete, and our energy levels at different points in our day. If we have more energy during the morning, this may be the best time for us to work on important and urgent tasks. Some tasks may energize us, and placing them strategically in our schedule may actually give us energy and boost our productivity.[7]

Keeping a schedule is important, but tracking our time is also important. Think of tracking time as part of a continuous feedback loop. Tracking our time helps us gain insight into how we are spending our time, and how much time certain tasks or projects actually take.[7] Ultimately, this will help us become a more realistic and efficient schedulers of our time.

As we reflect on our schedule, how we actually spent our time, our to-do list, and tasks completed, creating a list of our completed tasks and accomplishments is useful. Such a list can help us visually see progress towards our goals, help us transition to the next step of a project, move on to new priorities, improve our sense of achievement, increase our self-esteem and even lessen our anxiety about getting everything done.[7]

3. STRATEGIES FOR WORKING MORE EFFICIENTLY

Better managing our time by setting priorities and developing a realistic and accurate schedule are foundational to success. Once we begin implementing our schedule and focusing on prioritized tasks, learning how to work more efficiently is the next step. Working more efficiently helps us make the most of our time, whether while working in our office, remotely from home, or while engaged in personal life activities. There are many strategies for working more efficiently, but in this article, we discuss four: focusing on one task at a time, avoiding procrastination, managing email time, and organizing your workspace.

As nursing faculty, it is essential we develop multitasking skills. In fact, many of us take pride in our ability to simultaneously manage multiple tasks and projects. Multitasking often becomes the norm for many of us, and in the academic setting and our personal lives, it seems the ability to multi-

task serves us well. As faculty, we have lectures to prepare, papers, exams and assignments to grade, meetings to attend, and the list goes on. Isn't it better if we do a little bit of each of these tasks concurrently to get it all done? The answer is, "No!"

Based on research, we now know multitasking is a myth. When we split our attention between different tasks at the same time, we are not getting more done. In fact, we are actually getting less done, creating more stress for ourselves, and the quality of our work suffers. Fully and completely focusing on one task at a time actually leads to more productivity, and higher quality work with fewer errors.[9] When we set aside time in our schedule to work on a specific task, we need to work on that task, and only that task, remaining fully focused and committed.

Avoiding procrastination is another strategy we can use for working more efficiently. Let's face it, there are tasks associated with work that we may not enjoy. For most of us, if we don't enjoy something, we will tend to put it off. We procrastinate in getting the work done, and often find ourselves rushed and under pressure to complete it at the last minute.

In 1995, philosophy professor John Perry introduced the concept of "structured procrastination," describing this as doing things that may or may not be important, while putting off doing something that is important (or urgent). He argued that in procrastinating one could actually be quite productive and get many other things done. However, when Perry finally got around to writing a complete book on procrastination, he conceded structured procrastination relies on self-deception.[10] It is important for us to be accountable to ourselves. Are we seriously identifying what is most important and urgent in our lives, or engaging in structured procrastination? Are we getting things done, just not getting the most important and urgent things done?

If we have difficulty being self-accountable, being accountable to another person may be beneficial. In education, we often collaborate on projects, research, papers, presentations, etc., and by default, we find ourselves accountable to others. If being accountable to others is helpful, we may want to consider identifying someone to be our "accountability partner." This may be a colleague at work, or a friend from our personal life. It's simply someone who we share our goals, priorities and plans with, and periodically share our self-evaluation of how we're doing.

Since we as faculty often work in collaboration with peers, we need to ensure we are not being a distractor or disruptor for others. How many times have we met with a group of peers for a committee meeting, or to work on a designated task, and most of the meeting was monopolized by someone talking about topics other than the purpose of the meeting? We may easily use meetings with peers as a form of procrastination, or as a way to meet our social needs. We need to socialize at work, and develop relationships, but during a scheduled work meeting is not the time. We need to be mindful of this tendency in ourselves, and be willing to politely refocus a colleague, or group, if needed.

Email can be one of the greatest disruptors of our productivity. As faculty we receive a lot of emails, ranging from student questions and concerns, to emails from colleagues, to emails from administrators. It seems everyone has a question and wants an answer from us. Answering emails can be all-consuming. One effective strategy for dealing with seemingly endless emails is to set aside designated times during the day for checking and responding to emails. This may be first thing in the morning, at a mid-point during the day, near the end of the day, or some combination of all three.[11] If we wait to respond to emails at the end of our day, we may find an issue is now resolved and requires no further action on our part.

In addition to scheduling times to check emails, experts recommend that we establish boundaries and set expectations for others regarding emails. We are not available to students, colleagues and administrators 24/7. Many individuals confuse email with instant messaging, and expect an immediate reply. One strategy is to clearly spell out in our course syllabus the timeframe in which we typically reply to emails, and our policy regarding emails received after hours and on weekends. Another important strategy is to turn off email notifications on our smart devices. Turning off notifications can help us adhere to our email-checking schedule, and decrease the temptation to check and reply to emails outside of work hours.[11] We need to protect our personal time, and the time we spend with those who are important to us.

The final recommendation for working more efficiently is organizing our workspace. The physical layout of our workspace is not as important as the atmosphere we create.[12] In assessing our workspace, we need to ask if it is conducive to productivity? Does it energize us? To create a more energizing workspace experts recommend we have space to move, or use a desk that allows us to work either sitting or standing. Having a designated place for all our electronic devices (i.e., tablets, smart phones, and other gadgets), and leaving them there, helps us resist distraction and the urge to use them. Adding a plant or two can make our workspace more energizing, and even helps clean the air in our workspace.

Including a few personal items in our workspace can help us

form an emotional connection with work. However, we don't want too many personal items or our workspace can become cluttered. Having an uncluttered, clean and tidy workspace is more conducive to work and productivity, and most experts recommend cleaning and tidying our office every day. A cluttered office can be a distraction, and you're not likely getting work done if you find yourself sitting in your messy office and thinking about cleaning it.[12]

4. STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING SELF-CARE

Effective self-care begins with taking time for ourselves; however, this relatively simple principle is often difficult to follow. Self-care is endorsed as a remedy for many things and has become a popular recommendation from physicians, health coaches and bloggers on social media. Researchers have shown the benefits of proper self-care include improved well-being, and lower morbidity, mortality, and healthcare costs.[13]

Self-care requires dedication and making ourselves a priority. When we can accomplish this, we can potentially restore balance to our otherwise unbalanced lives. There are numerous ways to incorporate self-care into our daily routine, but in this article, we will discuss three basic strategies: confidently saying no, being positively engaged with work, and using mindfulness to recharge our energy.

A common trait for many of us is the desire to please others. We will accept a project or sign up for a task that we don't necessarily want to do. Many of us develop an inner fear of being judged or rejected if we say no. By saying yes to these additional assignments, we have failed to put ourselves first, which can be critical in maintaining our emotional wellness. Emotional wellness is having the capacity to manage one's feelings and related behaviors including the realistic assessment of one's limitations, development of autonomy, and ability to cope effectively with stress.[14]

It is important to regularly remind ourselves that we simply can't do all of the things we are asked to do. Learning how to say no with confidence is a vital strategy in maintaining boundaries. One way to approach this is to ask for more time before giving an answer. When we have time to reflect on what is being asked of us, it can make our decision to say no easier. We can state something like, "Thanks so much for thinking about me for this opportunity. I want to evaluate the priorities I have at this time; can I get back to you within 24 hours?" Using this approach allows us to weigh the pros and cons, and also helps us avoid the need for making a split-second emotion-based decision. If we decide to say no, we can politely say something like, "I have evaluated my priorities, and right now isn't a good time. Please keep me

in mind for next time."

It's important to acknowledge we do not always have control over saying yes or no to all assignments or tasks. Sometimes we must perform tasks we would rather not. We need to remember the satisfaction we get from our daily work can be directly tied to the amount of effort and care we put into it, regardless of the work we are performing. In general, developing a positive mind-set about our work helps us effectively engage in and appreciate our jobs.[15] By doing this, we can take on any challenge that comes our way and see it as an opportunity for growth, not a roadblock preventing us from success.

Being engaged at work also includes developing relationships, and even friendships, with colleagues. Due to an increase in working remotely triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the use of social media and digital communications, we are losing our personal connections with one another in our work and personal lives. At work, becoming engaged can simply mean reaching out to a colleague or two for an occasional meeting over coffee or lunch. If we feel the need to engage with more of our colleagues, and boost morale, we could propose a few social activities, like a pot-luck lunch periodically, or implementing a "secret-pal" where we leave one another small tokens of appreciation from time to time. These activities can also be used to acknowledge and celebrate birthdays, work anniversaries or other milestones. If we feel the need to become more engaged with our colleagues, chances are at least some of our peers feel the same way.

Finally, being able to recharge our "internal battery" is an important strategy to assist us in promoting self-care. Spending excessive time problem-solving, daydreaming, or thinking negative or random thoughts can be draining. It can also make us more likely to experience stress, anxiety and symptoms of depression.[16] There are many strategies for recharging our energy levels, including physical exercise. Mindfulness, the practice of paying attention to the present moment nonjudgmentally, is a useful strategy for helping us feel emotionally and physically well.[17]

When we feel emotionally and physically well, it's often easier to navigate daily stressors in more healthy and productive ways. Practicing mindfulness exercises can direct our attention away from negative thinking and help us stay engaged.[16] While mindfulness is something we all naturally possess, it's more readily available to us when we practice it consistently. Whenever we bring awareness to what we are experiencing, either through our thoughts, emotions, or senses, we are being mindful. The actions we partake in on a day-to-day basis have the ability to recharge our mind,

re-energize our bodies and replenish our new-found appreciation of self-care.

5. WHY DOES ALL THIS MATTER?

Research concerning work-life interface has exploded over the past fifty years due to the changing trends in the nature of gender roles, families, work and careers.[18] The ever-changing trends in higher education, including technology, social media, and online education modalities post-COVID, provide additional factors that can limit faculty satisfaction and work-life balance. In this article we shared ideas that focused on managing our time, working more efficiently, and improving self-care. We must remember there is only one of us, we can't do it all, and we are ultimately the person responsible for setting boundaries and protecting our time and energy. We are also the person responsible for practicing self-care in order to restore our emotional and physical energy levels so we can focus on our priorities in life. Committing to self-care can strengthen stress resilience, and improve satisfaction and the ability to attain work-life balance.[1] Utilizing the simple tips and strategies in this article, we hope you will begin to take control of your life, determine your priorities, and work toward balancing your own "wheel of life."

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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