



# Balancing Personal and Professional Life

## For the Medical Family

BY JENNIFER WEST

Prioritization, effective time management, focus on communication, making small changes and taking a proactive role in life are small steps that can promote and support a balanced life.

The pressure to maintain a balanced life can prove tough for most professionals. However, factoring in long irregular hours and the stressful responsibilities, attempts to keep a healthy balance between professional and personal life can prove to be a particularly difficult feat for physicians and their families. Despite the challenges, prioritization, effective time management, focus on communication, making small changes and taking a pro-active role in life are small steps that can promote and support a balanced life.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one-third of full-time physicians worked 60 hours or more per week in 2006. Only 8 percent of all physicians and surgeons worked part-time, compared with 15 percent for all occupations. In addition, physicians and surgeons must travel frequently between office and hospital to care for their patients, often compromising personal time with family.

According to Robert Brooks, Ph.D., assistant clinical professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, who regularly treats physicians, there are key issues that can lead to an improper balance of work and personal lives. "Physicians are trained to help others so there is this wish to be available and accessible for their patients," said Brooks, co-author of the book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*. "But this can be problematic because physicians also have a family, leading to a great deal of stress as they try to balance everything."

### Be True to Your Values

When treating physicians, Brooks often asks the patients to make a list of things that are important in their lives. Most list their spouse, kids, family, health, religion and work. That notwithstanding, a number often report that they spend the least amount of time with the people and activities they assess as being most important to them. That's where prioritization comes in, according to



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Brooks. “I have many patients express that they sometimes feel estranged from their kids and are like strangers in their own homes. It is important to be true to your values to ensure that such situations are avoided.”

Brooks explains that being true to your values starts with small changes, noting that attempts to change many things at one time will likely produce unsatisfactory results. While making it home for dinner once a week may not seem like it will effect much change, it is the small things that set lasting results in motion, according to Brooks. He tells patients that it may entail scheduling time for their family, while at the same time learning to set certain limits and parameters on their obligations. “It could be as simple as trying to make it a point to attend the kids’ events—school conferences or sports activities. It is also important to start small to be able to fulfill those personal commitments.” He goes on to caution that it sometimes becomes difficult for family members, especially children, to cope if a parent commits to attending a function and cannot follow through.

Diane Halpern, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Claremont McKenna College, contends that achieving balance may require changing your own definition of what it means to be a “good parent,” creating ways to be close with the children on your own terms. “It is possible to make the two roles as parent and professional compatible,” says Halpern, co-author of *Women at the Top: Powerful Leaders Tell us How to Combine Work and Family*. “Redefining your definition of what it means to be a successful person in your careers can eliminate feelings of guilt and stress as long as you know and stick to rules and goals.”

### **Communication is Key**

Both Brooks and Halpern agree that communication is imperative when it comes time to initiating changes. Talking to your family to find out specifically what they expect and feel they need from you will make small changes meaningful by allowing you to focus your time efficiently. According to Marilyn Puder-York, Ph.D., a psychologist, professional/executive

coach and author of the book *The Office Survival Guide*. It is important for physicians to use exceptionally good communication skills when with their family members. Puder-York points out that both spouses have to agree on what expectations are with regard to a physician’s commitment to family involvement and sharing of personal time, especially since medicine is not a nine-to-five profession. If that’s not clear, there is a possibility for resentment to build. If a physician is focused on working and making money, and the spouse is internalizing resentment, it can lead to long-term problems, according to Puder-York.

“It’s about understanding the needs, wants and preference from the person you’ve chosen to commit to,” she says. “Whether it’s medical school, residency or a long-term career, compromise is important and there has to be a proactive approach on both sides.”

A physician and his or her spouse must have an accurate definition of balance specifically for *their* family and understand that the effort to achieve balance is ever-changing. According to Puder-York, periodic communication with each other ensures that both parties are on the same page. Making sure children understand the situation is even more important, she says.

### **Don’t Forget the Kids**

Children can sense when something is going on. “There are ways to keep children informed by being as honest as possible with them, while respecting the child’s age,” says Brooks. Talking to them about what’s happening is especially important, he says, because kids may draw conclusions that are often more serious than what the reality is.

If there is a breakdown in communication, children may feel that they are not as important to their parents as their work. Even when things get very busy, children need to know that there will be time that is just for them. It need not necessarily be a big chunk of time, says Brooks, but it’s the short precious moments that can be most important. He also advises that parents be proactive in building good times. “Leading a balanced life makes it easier for them to be involved. Conversely,

it can become difficult to raise resilient kids if their parents are not capable of handling setbacks.”

## Taking Control

Most experts agree that conscientious efforts to change should be coupled with a resolve to lead a more controlled life. It is proven that people are more resilient when they feel they have a sense of control of their lives.

According to Brooks, “We are the author of our own lives. There are things we can put into place before it spirals out of control.” For physicians, it is important to figure out how time spent not on call or working will best be used, he says. “Will it be used to do more work or to spend time doing things that make one truly happy?”

AMA Alliance member Nancy White is familiar with the ongoing stress medical families face. As the spouse of a physician for 41 years, she says, “It is difficult because the medical profession is not as respected as it used to be and combined with the stresses of modern living, the negative messages from society serve to devalue the consistent, dedicated efforts physicians make in trying to help their patients. When doctors’ best efforts are not appreciated, families who see how much dedication is involved tend to feel resentful of public anti-medicine attitudes.”

## It Starts with Personal Fulfillment

There are many stresses and challenges in today’s world, says Brooks, but one of the most important coping mechanisms we can develop is a plan for dealing with them. He notes that the ability to cope, become a good problem solver, react better to situations and make a contribution to the lives of others but not at the expense of their own health will translate to personal and professional fulfillment. When a person is engaged in helping others, he says, it gives them more meaning, purpose and passion. But it is important to not give so much to others that they neglect their own lives.

“Learning to balance your life can be very difficult, but think of what life will be like if it’s not addressed,” said Brooks. “I’ve counseled heart attack patients and those with children in drug rehab programs who wish they had addressed imminent problems before the situation got desperate.”

The experts interviewed agree that while it’s difficult to promote and achieve balance, there are no viable alternatives to trying. The reality is that there are many variables which we have no control over, but many which we *can* address. Being the author of your own life and making the changes slowly to produce the best results is possible, says Brooks. “By partaking in things that give you the greatest joy, you will be in a better position to be productive,” he states.

“There always needs to be a tradeoff,” adds Puder-York. “It’s not going to be perfect, but you have to find what works for you. There is the illusion that doctors are smart enough to connect the dots. But it can be difficult to bring it all together.”

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