



## of Balance Your Way

by Cindy Matthews

Recently, I had lunch with a group of friends, two of whom are retired. Those of us still actively employed commented about the well-rested complexions of the two retirees. One who is a retired teacher shared her recipe for balance with us.

"Well, I've finally found balance in my life. When I was working, I never had time for myself. I had never taken the time to read a novel until recently. I had saved up all of my house jobs from the school year and worked non-stop the first weeks every summer playing catch-up. Now, every day, I have choices on what I want to do with my day."

I was intrigued by the words she had used: balance, never, choices, non-stop, catch-up. Many people who live with a hectic lifestyle can identify with her story. The harsh electronic buzz of the alarm clock greets us each morning as our feet jump out of bed. Each day is a relative blur as we rush from one "have-to" to another. We're all striving to find that perfect work-life balance.

Interestingly, finding harmony and balance in life is not unique to our North American culture. In Germany, managers recognize that employees who have achieved work/family balance are far more productive than workaholic types who

struggle with balance issues. In fact, some companies are researching and implementing unique ways to assist employees in their quest for balance. <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,1538716,00.html> As examples, the Netherlands is experimenting with flexible work-day arrangements while Austria has extended parental leave to three years. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/12/2/34566853.pdf>

### *Balancing the scales:*

Balance is the ability to find mental or emotional stability. Furthermore, it involves empowerment to make decisions and bring things into perspective.

### *You're in the driver's seat:*

Richard Carlson, author of *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* books (Hyperion), is a great proponent of making choices that are right for you. He believes that while stress is inevitable, it can really beat you up and take away your energy and spirit. Carlson disagrees with people who claim that stress gives them an edge, stating instead that stress causes people to focus on

small details and to sweat small agendas.

Tricia Eagle of Diversified Occupational Therapy Services in Kitchener, Ontario, has years of experience working with people with mental and physical health challenges. She has observed that they often overdo it on days they are feeling well; that then sets back their recovery. She agrees with Carlson, "It is important to say no to some people and yes to ourselves."

### *Hey, I need some help over here!:*

Without a doubt, we simply cannot do it all. If we are serious about finding balance, we need to ask others for assistance. If we have a roommate, spouse, friend or the funds to hire an expert, we need to know when to ask for help. Sure, most of us suffer from "superman/superwoman" syndrome, but what often occurs is that we make mistakes. Learning to delegate to others and asking for help in sharing the workload can allow us to truly implement a team effort in completing tasks.

### *It's all in the attitude:*

Some of us truly need an attitude adjustment. How often do you catch yourself making "if only...then" statements? Realistically, at the end of the day, the only person who can help you find harmony and balance is you.

When people face life challenges (physical or mental strain), Eagle says that, "It is important that they have boundaries for themselves and others and pace their daily activities in order for them to feel that they have accomplished some tasks. This creates a win-win situation and fosters a sense of well-being which in turn increases self-esteem."

If you find yourself making "if only...then" statements, choose to enjoy the moment for what it is rather than wishing yourself happiness at some future date.

### *Yeah, but then I feel guilty:*

There is a saying that if you need a job done, ask a busy person. Far too often, hyper-industrious people will, without even realizing, accept the challenge to do more. Quickly they become overwhelmed, run out of steam and fail. Samantha Whiteside says, "I was always taught that you need to take care of yourself first. Sometimes I find it really hard to say no, but I like to think that I do it when it's important. I'm a total people pleaser."

Many of us have fallen into the same trap. Whiteside explains it this way, "While I was training, it was always a big downer to tell my friends that I couldn't go out with them because I had to train, but there was no way I was going to meet my goals without focusing on them so it was definitely worth it." Part of learning to say no is determining our own priorities and sticking with a plan.

We have all played the "yes-no" game. We usually end up playing the game out of some sense of guilt. However, we do have a choice in the matter. There are situations

where we feel we cannot say no because it is a non-negotiable task. However, these circumstances are few and far between. Don't go on autopilot and fall into the "yes-no" game; instead, learn how to effectively say "no."

### *Blame game:*

If you've mastered the "yes-no" game, then you'll be a pro at the blame game. We love to exaggerate a situation's impact and make a small deal really big. We allow negative thoughts to run rampant in our minds and fuel our stress. Paying attention to our thoughts and recognizing when we're playing the blame game is the key to finding harmony in ourselves.

### *I just don't have time:*

Whining, "I don't have time for me" is a cop-out. Whiteside and Eagle are super busy people. They get a lot done each day. How do they do it?

Whiteside takes this approach. "I take time to myself and I do my best to not let things I have no control over bother me." She searches for balance by being well planned and goal oriented while rolling in time for herself, doing activities such as spending time with family, reading and exercising. Further, she realizes that eating breakfast and getting a good night's rest assist her in her quest for balance.

### *Maybe there's another way:*

Finding harmony sometimes is as simple as modification. For example, restructuring work to incorporate an earlier or later start time or working from home are possible alternatives. How do you know unless you try?

My retiree friend postponed finding harmony and happiness until her retirement years. She is fortunate that her hectic lifestyle up until retirement did not rob her of her health. Why should we wait until retirement or vacation to find harmony and balance in our lives? Be happy now! Find ways to regenerate yourself every day. Go to the gym, take a walk, play golf, read, pray, dance, meditate or learn a new skill. De-stressing in order to find balance helps to reduce cortisol, a hormone responsible for increasing abdominal fat and muscle breakdown. Increase your happy hormones by finding some fun...not later, but right now.

So step on the scale that leads to a balanced lifestyle. Be a caretaker to yourself first, not last, and find harmony and balance that is right for you. ✨

Cindy Matthews is a school administrator working with at-risk youth. Cindy plans to retire in five years and has spent the past thirty years balancing life and work by actively preparing for retirement by laughing hard, attending aqua-fit classes, water colour painting and writing.