

Work-Life Balance for Attorneys: Choice, Compromise and Control

By Camille Heenan

Attorneys consistently struggle with the elusive concept of "work-life" balance. Professional women have been told that we can "have it all" if we are willing to put in the effort. Here is the truth: no matter how you approach it, it is difficult to balance a successful legal career with a family and a social life. So, do not beat yourself up if you are not successful at "balancing" all of your competing responsibilities. You can have a full, rich and rewarding life. But you cannot expect to not make some sacrifices and compromises in the process. Once you are realistic about balance, you can implement a strategy to exert more control over your life by making conscious choices based upon what is important to you.

The Three C's: Choice, Compromise and Control

Choice: Deciding What You Want

Life is a series of choices. When you are engulfed in a large case in the office, it is difficult to realize you have any choice in the situation. It is easy to feel trapped and powerless. No matter what your situation, you always have a choice in the matter. You choose what it is you are going to do. The first step is to determine what you want to choose. Ask yourself: What do you want and why do you want it? There are certain things that almost all of us want (more time, less stress, etc.). It is important to get very clear on why you want something. Do you want more time to spend with your family? How much more time? What would having this time give you? What is important to you about this? When you focus on what you want, and why you want it, it helps make the choices and compromises you must make easier.

Compromise: What are you giving up?

When you make a choice, you are saying "yes" to something, you are also saying "no" to a number of other things.

This is where we get back to the idea of compromise and sacrifice. If you choose to have an evening with your family, what are you choosing to not do? What you giving up? Working late, the idea of being a superstar attorney, always being there for your boss, talking to friends, exercising, etc. Remember: you are the one who is in control of this choice and this compromise.

Control: Setting Boundaries

Once you decide what you want, why you want it and what you are giving up, now is the time to make it happen. This entails setting boundaries. It is difficult to set boundaries because we fear we might be seen as demanding or difficult. In order to really have some control over your life and career, and make conscious choices, you must set boundaries. Start small. For instance, if you want more alone time with your husband and set up a "date" with him, you must be clear about your intention to leave at 6:00 p.m. on a certain day. Put this time in your calendar. Tell others you are leaving at 6:00 p.m. and, don't feel the need to "over explain." Instead of "I really need to leave early today, my husband and I are going out to dinner and I can't cancel on him." Say, "I am leaving at 6:00 p.m. today, I can work on that first thing in the morning." You will be amazed at how good you feel about yourself for choosing to do something you truly want to do.

Reality check: If you leave at 6:00 p.m. for a date night several times a month, your life will not suddenly be in perfect balance. You will, however, be making conscious choices based upon what you really want and are willing to give up. This means you will have more control over your time - and your life.

Camille Heenan is a NAWL member, attorney and career coach who founded www.AttorneyCrossroads.com, an on-line community and resource site for women attorneys.