WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BALANCED?

Feeling “out of balance” is a common reason for seeking to improve time management skills as it can have a profoundly negative impact on attitude, motivation, and happiness. Balance is hard to define, so we tend to define it by how it feels when we sense it’s lacking. People often try to alleviate perceived imbalance by attempting to do more, which generally makes matters worse. Feeling out of balance results from inner conflicts between values and actions or between competing values. Resolving conflicts requires making difficult choices and prioritizing.

Balance is not about doing more. It’s not about spending equal amounts of time on all your high-priority projects; some things don’t warrant as much time as others. It’s not about a 50-50 split between medical school and “your life”; medical school is a big part of your life. In fact, balance is not really about time. As long as you’re healthy and fulfilled, you can be balanced even if you focus most of your time and attention on one aspect of your life. In contrast, you can outwardly appear balanced – spend time doing a variety of things – yet be inwardly miserable. Achieving balance requires aligning your values with your behaviors and your short-term goals with your long-term goals. It also requires distinguishing needs from desires and prioritizing.

Balance over a lifetime might require shorter periods of significant imbalance in which a large percentage of your time and energy is directed toward one thing. The caveat – that one thing should be important. If medicine is the career you want, then medical school is where you need to be, and it is normal and necessary for your life to be a little asymmetrical (i.e., “unbalanced”) right now. There’s really no getting around it, for long periods of time over the next four years, you will spend an disproportionate amount of time and energy focusing on your career (i.e., your medical education). This is the reality of becoming a physician, something you have chosen. Unfortunately, there is no miraculous time management tip that will allow you to have it all… all at once… right now.

The periods of imbalance you will experience are not all bad. Intense investment makes the difference between success and failure, excellence and mediocrity. By committing to your values and making the time for proper planning, short-term imbalance can create long-term balance. In addition, it can make you more appreciative and respectful of the time you do have for other interests. It can make you less likely to squander your time in frivolous pursuits.

Juggling multiple roles and responsibilities and balancing your own needs with commitments to others makes achieving a sense of balance much more difficult than if you were truly an independent agent. By focusing on yourself (e.g., your education), you may feel you’re being selfish and letting others down. In addition, family and friends may place unreasonable demands on your time and energy. You might feel pulled in multiple directions. To achieve long-term balance you might need to say “no” more often. You may have to explain to a loved one that, at least temporarily, you must focus on your needs, and one of these is uninterrupted study time. These challenges are often daunting for non-traditional students – those who are married and have children or other dependents, such as elderly parents – but can be equally challenging to someone who is single and living at home with parents and siblings who don’t fully understand or appreciate the demands of a medical education.

Resources tend to identify the following “dimensions” that should be considered when attempting to rebalance one’s life: health/well-being, significant relationships (family, friends, romantic partners), career, community, hobbies, and spirituality.
BALANCING SELF-CARE AND ACADEMICS

Self-care includes activities such as eating a healthful diet, getting adequate exercise and sleep, maintaining important relationships, engaging in true recreation (rejuvenating activities), and nurturing one’s spirituality. These represent some of the basic necessities of life, and yet, they are often the very things that medical students push aside and treat as optional luxuries. Quite the contrary, these things are vitally important to a medical student, and the most successful students make them high priority items. The key is planning. When organizing one’s life and creating a schedule, it is important to allocate specific blocks of time for self-care. The payoff is high – better health, better emotional/mental wellbeing, and sharpened mental focus. The challenge is in recognizing that quality, not quantity, is what matters. None of these things have to take a lot of time – make a 15-minute phone call to a friend, select the healthy menu item or take a few extra minutes to cook a healthy meal, engage in “high-intensity interval training” (HIIT) or 4-minute “Tabata” workouts, which take very little time but share the same health benefits as lengthier workouts, spend an hour each week on a favorite pastime or in thoughtful reflection/meditation/prayer.

BALANCING FAMILY AND MEDICAL SCHOOL

Balancing medical school with marriage and children can be particularly challenging, especially for, but certainly not limited to, women. Some have access to resources that allow them to do this extremely well, others don’t. It’s difficult to overemphasize the importance of having a support network, including individuals who have been where you are and can offer practical advice based on personal experience. Don’t go it alone; seek out clinical faculty and mentors, talk to peers, or get assistance from the MSUCOM Offices of Personal Counseling and Academic and Career Guidance. But remember, everyone is different. What was right for one person may not be right for you. Gather information and talk to people, but ultimately, make decisions based on your values, goals, and circumstances.

BALANCING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND MEDICAL SCHOOL

Medical school is a tough time to begin dating and can add significant stress to established relationships. It’s not impossible or even inadvisable to begin a new relationship, but be realistic. In order to be a successful medical student, you cannot afford drama. Having a partner who supports what you’re doing is important and emotionally satisfying, but if you’re with someone who doesn’t “get it,” is jealous of the time you need to study, and makes you feel bad about yourself, the relationship is doomed. Openly and honestly communicate your needs, boundaries and limitations, but if that doesn’t work, and if the relationship is important to you, then seek professional assistance from the MSUCOM Office of Personal Counseling.

BALANCING ACADEMICS AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Extracurricular activities (e.g., student organizations) and elective courses provide numerous potential benefits. They are often a powerful reminder of the very reason you are in medical school, and in that sense, they serve a vital motivational function in your medical education. They allow you to broaden your horizons, introduce you to other possibilities you may want to explore, and can look very good on a CV, but there is a dark side too. Extracurricular activities can leave you stretched too thin and allow you to take your eye off the ball. Not all activities are equal in terms of long-term benefit, and if your participation comes at the expense of academic performance you may be doing yourself more harm than good. Striking the right balance between academics and extracurricular activities requires knowing your long-range goals and evaluating how these activities fit into the big picture. It necessitates determining your priorities and carefully planning to ensure you aren’t sacrificing something even more important. You don’t have to take advantage of every “once in a lifetime” opportunity, and you don’t have to do it all now. There will be other opportunities in the future. Make smart, informed choices. If you find yourself struggling to keep up in your required coursework, forgetting to do important things, neglecting your health, or damaging your relationships, you will need to let things go.

MSUCOM Office of Personal Counseling and Health Promotion:

Office of Academic and Career Guidance
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Additional resources on achieving balance:
Evaluate Priorities to Balance Personal Life, Medical School:
How to Create a Balanced Life: http://tinybuddha.com/blog/9-tips-to-create-a-balanced-life/
HIT/HIIT/Tabata:
http://www.shape.com/fitness/workouts/home-tabata-workout-blast-fat-4-minutes
Apps for mobile devices:
http://greatist.com/fitness/10-interval-training-mobile-apps-download-right-now