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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT COACHING

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Letting Go of The Myth of Work-Life Balance

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Work-life balance is a topic that has been written about and dissected time and time again. Employees strive to find it. Employers look for ways to promote and support it. But how many people do you know who have actually achieved it?

Really think about this. Can you name a handful of people in your circle who've found an ideal version of work-life balance? Can you think of even one? If you can name someone who has it down, consider what specifically it is that they have found.

Most of my clients come to coaching with work-life balance as a top goal, as if it's a specific fixed place to work towards, achieve and then maintain as-is forevermore. Much to their dismay, my take on the topic blows up their vision: I believe that this magical unicorn that we've slapped a universal label on doesn't exist.

What most people who talk about work-life balance are really looking for is fulfillment, contentment, peace, a sense of purpose, freedom from guilt, space and permission to give energy to things that are good for their wellbeing and fill them up.

What this looks like is unique to each of us, and to find it we need to consider the complete makeup of our whole lives and assess what's really missing, at different stages.

Our ability to achieve the balance we seek is impacted by many external factors - organizational, economic, political, patriarchal (just ask working mothers, who struggle the most within those systems), and the many outdated structures that need to evolve. Given this, it's important to focus on aspects we can take ownership over. If we can pinpoint what we're specifically in search of, we can figure out how to create it in a realistic and achievable way that acknowledges our unique circumstances.

What I seek is a sense of internal harmony as I embrace the inevitable imbalance of life. By accepting that all aspects of my life can't possibly be equally tended to at any given time, I'm free to choose where I put my available energy given my obligations, needs and wants. It has nothing to do with divvying up hours equally to work and life, because work is just one part of my very full life and the lines are blurred in different measures every day.

Internal harmony comes when I make deliberate choices about where I'm putting my energy. That requires clarity around what I'm willing to let go of in order to have the freedom to flow my energy from place to place, role to role.

This gives me ownership over my time, which I believe better captures what many employees are searching for:

- A sense of ownership over their time, and
- The ability to choose how to structure their lives to meet their obligations, while prioritizing what they value.

Leaning In and Letting Go

Work will always be abundant and challenging, and life's demands will always change and present unexpected curveballs. So, this thing that we're talking about - which some have re-named **work-life integration** or **work-life blending** - may not even need a title. It's not a fixed goal or a prescribed formula, but rather a lifelong process that requires constant reflection and reimagination through different stages of your life and work.

It's not something we find, it's something we create intentionally, and re-evaluate constantly.

I truly believe we need to look at energy distribution, not time management alone. We need to give ourselves permission to let go of things that are lower on our current priority list, so we can embrace the things that are higher up, guilt-free.

I went through a major career and life transition in shifting from my former career as a television production executive to being a sole proprietor running my own coaching business. While I trained for my certification, I took a lower-paying full-time job in the content industry and worked with my first coaching clients at night. This all happened when my child was just four years old and my husband was advancing in his own career. I never had so many roles and obligations to fulfill at one time. But to my surprise, none of it felt that oppressive or hard.

People regularly asked how I was coping during that period. The reality was I was actually experiencing internal peace and calm, because I was energized by how fulfilling and meaningful my life was. I was living my values and bringing my whole self to all facets of my life.

To give my energy to all that was filling me up, I had to let go of many things: a bigger salary, a tidy house and extended family gatherings and social events, all with a 'for now' attitude.

I leaned into being fully present and having fun with my young daughter and husband in the moments of free time I had, and let go of the idea that asking for help meant I was failing. I leaned in big time to the help that was available to me, which allowed me guilt-free energy to enjoy my priorities.

Ask 'what am I prioritizing right now, and what will I let go of for now?'

Many people, women in particular, are challenged by the harmful narrative of "I must do it all, and give equal attention to everything." Letting go of that belief can be so freeing and paves the way to more peace and less striving. It doesn't have to feel like a 'trade off' or sacrifice when you choose intentionally, with acceptance of your *for now*.

The choices we make are never forever, because our lives are constantly evolving. Parents of young kids may let go of things that they will get to lean into again when their kids are older. *For now* acknowledges



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that as life changes, so will your priorities. By recognizing this, you can make a big difference in your overall level of life satisfaction.

Flowing in Harmony

Different parts of your life are going to need more attention at different times, just like the instruments in a symphony; many sounds flow together in different measures over the course of a piece of music. The volume on each instrument may rise and fall individually, but there is harmony.

There will be times - like during a big project or a role transition - when you'll need to put more energy into your work. When you choose to put your energy there because you recognize it as a 'for now' priority, you can flow with it instead of resisting it or judging it as a negative imbalance. You can then make a conscious choice to 'turn up the volume' and give more energy to your family, hobbies or other passions once the busy work period is over.

If there simply is no ebb and flow, you may need to ask yourself if there's something major that needs to change. Perhaps your work demands or culture don't mesh with your personal values or mental health and wellness needs in your current stage of life, and that might be a signal to look for a new job.

By learning to compartmentalize stages of life instead of focusing on a work-life divide, you can let yourself flow with the impermanent imbalances through these stages.

You can assess and adjust at any time. Before the pandemic, I had a hard boundary of no working on weekends because I saved my weekend energy for my family and recharging. But pandemic times required me to flow with even more flexibility between my roles and priorities day-to-day, so I adjusted my schedule to give more energy to my child during the week, and opened up slots for clients on weekends when my husband could give his energy more freely to her care. I made sure to block off time for my health, hobbies and wellbeing throughout the week to protect myself from burn out.

If something feels off or unsustainable, ask yourself if there are any changes you can make - supports to lean on, boundaries to put in place, requests to make of others - in order to flow more harmoniously and protect the things that matter most.

Finding Value in Your Work

It may also be helpful to consider and understand the meaning that work brings to your life. For some, work is a means to a paycheck. For others, it's an ingredient that adds meaning to their lives. In both scenarios, if we can pinpoint the value and impact of our work, it doesn't just have to be something we tolerate; it can be a fulfilling piece of our whole lives.

How does your work align with your value system? If work is a means to put food on the table, are you properly valuing your role as the provider for your family? Shifting your perspective may provide more internal harmony knowing that the hours spent at work are allowing you to honour your values.

What are you proud of in your role? How are your contributions impacting your organization and/or the world? Can you re-frame how you value your contribution? Connect to the deeper sense of purpose in your work, bring your whole self into your workplace, and you may enjoy way more satisfaction across your whole life.

The Big Thief of Harmony: Guilt

I recently asked a former client, a working mother in a leadership role, to reflect and pinpoint what she was truly in search of when she first came to coaching seeking work-life balance. Without hesitation, she answered “freedom from guilt.”

She initially thought she needed to find a new job that would offer her this elusive balance. But as she connected to her core values, current needs and true priorities, she realized that the job wasn't the issue. She needed a change in perspective. She learned to drop the belief that she needed to give 100% to everything all the time, and let go of the burden of self-imposed pressure and guilt.

Undeniably, sometimes the guilt does come from the outside, from inflexible workplaces or managers. In those cases, you may need to evaluate if the culture or demands of your workplace allow you to stay true to your values.

But oftentimes, the guilt is self-imposed. You may need to let go of caring about other people's opinions, or let your co-workers *in* on what you're struggling with to see how they can support. Guarding our personal issues at work is becoming a thing of the past. We are whole humans and one area of life affects the others.

On the employer side, it's not enough for organizations to say they promote flexibility. Leaders and managers need to understand and empathize with employees' unique circumstances, and create opportunities for employees to share all parts of their lives at work because these parts are inherently connected. Leaders need to walk the talk and live the policies so employees know it's safe to do the same.

Flexible Future

As we emerge from the initial challenges of the pandemic, organizations are re-evaluating their work environments and policies as employees re-evaluate their lives. We know that people want more ownership over their time and more flexibility to flow between their roles and priorities during the work day.

Flexible work environments are going to play a big role in talent retention and employee engagement. Hybrid work-from-home models will be key to keeping many employees happy and in command of their lives.

But we can't rely on the system to design our own unique picture of harmony. That part rests with each of us.



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Stop trying to balance! It's stressful, burdensome and blocks us from taking a good hard look inside ourselves to figure out what we really need, yearn for and value.

Instead, ask yourself what matters to you and how much energy you can realistically give to those things, for now (because it will change!), and make those choices consciously. Assess often, adjust, and embrace the imbalance.

ABOUT JENNY



Jenny Tryansky is an ICF-credentialed Certified Professional Co-Active Coach with a **whole life/whole person approach**.

In her private practice, she works virtually with clients around the world, specializing in working one-on-one with people who are driven yet highly self-critical.

She coaches clients to build meaningful, authentic lives, tackling personal and professional challenges with self-compassion and resilience, as they move forward toward their goals fuelled with confidence instead of self-criticism.

In addition to coaching private clients, Jenny is a writer, speaker, workshop & group leader and mindful self-compassion advocate.

She juggles life in Toronto with her husband and young daughter, and her work with clients around the world.

Connect with Jenny on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) and read her [articles with helpful resources](#) on her [website](#).

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