

# Questions to ask yourself ... for a better work/life balance

Clinical psychologist and author Dr Julie Smith on handling stress, setting boundaries and helping each other



## What matters most to me?

On a piece of paper, jot down the different areas of your life that you value – health, career progression, parenting, intimate relationships, friendships, social life. In each box, write a few words about what you want to contribute. Then rate each out of 10 in terms of how important it is to you, and rate it again out of 10, based on how much you feel you're living in line with that. Those scores give an indication of where you might have been taken away from something that matters to you. For example, your relationship may be 10 out of 10 important, but it's a 2 out of 10 in terms of how much you're showing up recently. This isn't a tool for self-criticism, because it's normal that life pulls us in different directions, but it gives you clarity. Balance isn't a perfect sweet spot that you achieve; it's like walking along a balance beam – you're constantly noticing if you're moving too far in one direction and adjusting. That's why you can do this exercise fairly quickly, but also fairly often.

## How do I listen – and respond – to stress?

People see stress as a personal weakness – evidence they're not coping. But stress is just information, and if we can see it as that, we can ask, "What is this telling me about what I need?" It might be that you recognise there's been extra pressure because a co-worker has been off, so you haven't been able to keep up with things at home. When we don't see stress as indicative of self-worth, we're able to listen to what we need, rather than trying to defend ourselves.

## Who pays the price when the balance is off?

Think of stress as a bank account; if you continually take money out without replenishing it, you'll soon be in the red. Our body is built to cope with stress, but

with the promise that it gets something in return. It's so easy, when we think we're the only one that pays the price when the balance is off, to just keep going, but when you're not at your best, all the people you're connected to also experience that. We tend to work to exhaustion, then take a couple of weeks off – but that's not how our bodies are built. Take time out of each day to do something you know helps replenish or revive you.

## **Am I saying yes when I want to say no?**

Practising being able to advocate for yourself, and drawing and holding boundaries, is one of the most crucial life skills when it comes to work/life balance. It's a great exercise to say, "Let me come back to you on that" or, "I'll double-check and let you know." That gives you time to think about it, or talk it over with a trusted friend. We often anticipate disapproval, judgment or disappointment, and that can build up such anticipatory anxiety that we over-explain, but a lot of people don't expect a yes to everything. Start small, saying no in contexts that feel a challenge but manageable, and you'll build up confidence.

## **Where do I have choice?**

When the balance is off, some of it can be due to things out of your control. Maybe there's illness in the family or you're in a job that is taking too much from you but financial constraints mean you don't have many options. Push it where it moves. Are there areas where you could have some agency? You might do long shifts as a nurse, but out of work, could you use your time differently, so you make space for your own replenishment? It happens a lot in therapy – a therapist doesn't tell you what to do, but helps you work out what is and isn't negotiable in your situation.

## **Am I having it all or just doing it all?**

On top of that, ask yourself, "Do I expect myself to do it all perfectly?" When that's the case, the reality doesn't come close to the idea. We spend every minute of every day chasing our tails, trying to keep up with everything, so we stop enjoying any of it. Then the balance is off and we feel miserable because we're trying to do everything and be everything for everybody. We're anxious about dropping the ball, and there's no time to enjoy the connections we have with the people that matter. That's where the first question, about values, comes back into play. If something has to give, what could it be, and am I OK with that?

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