

A Useful Guide to Work Life Balance



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Toolkit

This Useful Guide contains lots of exercises to help you achieve a work life balance that suits you. If you would like to do the exercises on your computer you can download the MS Word toolkit, which contains all the exercises, by clicking [here](#).

Chapter 1: The Work Life Seesaw

What this Useful Guide is about

The fact that you're reading this Useful Guide on 'Work Life balance' in itself suggests you feel that something may be out of balance in your life, though you may be unsure what it is that's weighing too heavily. Sometimes we just have a nagging feeling that things are not quite right, a feeling that doesn't go away. At others we know with absolute clarity that we need to make changes in the way we live. Urgently.

The aim of this Useful Guide is to help you identify what is out of balance for you (it's not always what you think) and make the changes necessary to live a less stressful life with much more energy and well-being.

What we mean by Work Life balance

Of course 'Work' and 'Life' cannot really be opposed in any simple way. Daily life involves work both paid and unpaid. Work is part of life – a central part for many people giving them a sense of identity. Yet the term 'Work Life balance' has come into common use, most often to refer to people over-dominated by work, usually though not always their paid work. Sometimes it's a combination of paid work and home responsibilities that creates a life weighed down by too much to do. A life low in spaciousness and high in constant busyness and the accompanying tension and stress.

The term 'Work Life balance' is therefore best seen as a useful shorthand for having too much of some things, often to do with your paid work and too little of others, often including family and friends and taking time to enjoy the lighter side of life. Using this shorthand, having a good Work Life balance means living in a way that gives space to all the different aspects of your life from your paid work through your home life and the people you love to all the other activities and interests that give you pleasure and satisfaction.

Looked at this way a good Work Life balance will be different for each individual, sometimes very different. There is no right answer – it's not even always the case that we need less work. If you're an exhausted commuter with childcare responsibilities you may well need to reclaim more 'life' back from your job. If you're an aspiring novelist or artist with a day job, however, balance for you

may require feeding more work time into your life to allow you the satisfaction exercising your creativity may bring.

Why balance is important

When we feel we have too much to do and we're overwhelmed by all the demands on our time and energy, what we need in the immediate is practical help. And fast. This Useful Guide will certainly help you get off the hamster wheel. But at the same time you'll find, as you begin to explore what's in and out of balance for you, that the search needs to go deeper.

That's because balance is not just a good feeling, it's central to our existence. Think about it. Balance is designed into our bodies, a central spine working the two sides of our body, two legs to stand on, two hemispheres to the brain. With time and age our bodies can get out of balance - years of that habit many of us have of standing with one hip jutting out, for example, can result in a pelvis out of alignment and lower back pain.

Balance is also designed into our minds in the way we have two different kinds of capacities, cognitive and affective, thinking and feeling, head and heart. These too can be out of balance: some people seem to be all head, always thinking, minds never at rest, constantly problem solving. The danger here is to be out of touch with the emotional side which then burrows underground and makes itself felt as stress. Others seem to be all heart, running on emotional highs and lows, under-using their rational side and causing themselves stress of a different kind.

What you will find, therefore, as you move towards a better 'Work Life balance' is that you become aware of some of the more subtle ways imbalance can creep in. Here are just a few examples ...

- **Being vs Doing:** the pattern many of us adopt of filling every waking moment with some kind of activity, rarely taking any quiet time out, can be a major contributor to stress as well as a difficult habit to break.
- **Active vs Inactive:** how much we use our bodies or allow them to stiffen and stagnate is another key factor in our well-being.
- **Present vs Future Oriented:** the tendency to be more future oriented than present is one I know well. As I've got better at self-observation I realise that I'm always ahead of myself, jumping in my mind to the next task on the list while still in the middle of this one. This habit can be difficult to recognise but it takes its toll in tension and fatigue.

- Self vs Other Focused: an important area to have in balance, this one: too much oriented to self and you're likely to suffer from anger and frustration. Too much oriented to others and you may find it hard to say no. A key area where awareness is all.

The Work Life Seesaw

But that's for later. Let's go back to our 'Work Life balance' shorthand and start the process of finding out, for you, what's weighing too heavy. If it helps you may want to shut your eyes. Try this exercise. Imagine yourself in a children's playground. You're standing in front of a seesaw. Now start thinking about the 'Work' side of your life. For the sake of the exercise, let's call 'Work' the things that feel like chores, the less rewarding, more energy sapping sides of your paid work, all the work you bring home either on your laptop or in your mind. Throw in all your time thinking about work even when you're not there, and add in your home responsibilities, say the school run, laundry, washing up, whatever of those responsibilities feels like a chore. Imagine the seesaw going down on that side, weighed down by all these chores.

Note that you may prefer to do this exercise imagining a giant set of scales, the type shown on the front cover. You could also, if words work better for you, list the contents of each side of your seesaw or scales.

Now turn to the other side – this is the 'Life' side. Pile on here all the things in your life where you feel you have a choice, the activities you enjoy, the tasks and responsibilities you'd choose to take on even if you didn't have to do them, the sides of life that really nurture you – this might include the stimulating sides of your paid work, what you do for relaxation, family time, time with friends, whatever shines bright in your 'life'.

Purely impressionistically at this point, what's happening to your seesaw? Or scales? Where is the greatest weight? Is the Work side so heavy that this side of your seesaw stays resolutely down or hardly rises at all, or does the Life side pull it up, weightier than you'd realised? Is there anything you're learning from this exercise so far that you didn't realise before?

Now try this

Choose one item from the heavier side and take it off? What happens? Then try adding a new item to the lighter side. If the Life side is lighter, the new item might be, say, a day off or something you know gives you a real sense of well-being. What's happening now?

What you will certainly have seen is movement as one side goes up or down in response to your adding and taking away: an illustration of two key points we'll keep coming back to in this Useful Guide ...

- First and most important: you have choice. More so than you may think. You can reduce or increase, temporarily or permanently. You can make changes that are beneficial.
- And second: achieving balance is not a goal you reach once and for all. It's less of a state, more of an ongoing process where you find yourself needing to adjust the 'more' or the 'less' as you feel the movement of the different sides of your life in relation to each other. What you'll get out of this Useful Guide is awareness of how to make choices and what you need to choose. Once again, awareness is crucial. Until you have a clear awareness of what's wrong, you can't put it right.

Helping you assess

This early stage is about helping you assess what's in and out of balance for you. The seesaw exercise has given you a broad brush picture. A way to home in on what, more specifically, needs attention is to do an audit of your life in terms of what you have 'Too much' of, 'Too little', or 'Just enough'. Fill in the chart below being as freewheeling as you like. You can include tasks, responsibilities, activities, people, feelings, fears, whatever comes to mind:

| Too Much | Too Little | Just Enough |
|----------|------------|-------------|
| | | |

For Read Our Aud Readers: The Editor has reviewed

Consider your results

Look first at the Just Enough column. Where have you got it right? Think about how you managed that. Are there strategies you could use to work on the results of the other two columns?

Now look through the other two lists. Which is longer? This should give you some idea whether you should be looking more at adding in – if your 'Too Little' list is longer – or at taking away if your 'Too Much' list is the longer one.

Ideas space

Write down three ideas that occur to you for making three items from the 'Too Much' or 'Too Little' columns into 'Just Enough'.

1.

2.

3.

Choose one of these ideas and try it out today.

Who else is involved?

If we were free to do exactly what we wanted 'Work Life balance' probably wouldn't be a problem. But we aren't. In large part because we have to take other people and our responsibilities into account. Willingly in the case of those we love and care about. Less willingly in some cases: noisy neighbours, a bullying or over-demanding boss, difficult colleagues are just a few possibilities that come to mind.

One way of looking at the effects of others on our well-being is to analyse their influence in terms of energy. While being with some people gives us energy,

dealing with others takes it away. Zaps (gives you energy) and saps (takes energy away), we might say.

To get a clearer idea of who zaps and who saps you, who gives and who takes away your energy, fill in the chart below. Think about all the different areas of your life and all the people you interact with either in person or virtually through Facebook, say, or chatting online or email:

| Zaps | Saps |
|------|------|
| | |

For Best Out And Results: The chart has 10 rows

Any surprises?

An exercise like this can show up the way we deal with people in our lives in a different light.

Which is the longer list?

This is an important question as it bears on whether, overall, the people in our lives are adding to or taking away from our well-being. If the 'Saps' list is longer, can you think of any ideas for spending less time with any of these people or otherwise reducing their sapping effects? What ideas do you have for adding to the 'Zaps'?

Pulling it all together

The three exercises in this chapter have been designed to start opening up your ideas about what weighs too heavily in your life, what could be lightened, and who helps/hinders. As a way of pulling together all we've done so far, consider the 'Work Life balance' scale below. It's a scale for assessing, impressionistically, where you are between 1 (totally unbalanced – life all over the place) and 10 (nicely balanced, good feeling of well-being).

1 _____ 10
Totally unbalanced Nicely balanced

If you mark yourself on the scale now – don't think too hard, just go for a number on the scale that comes straight to mind – you will be clearer where you are starting from. If you are, say, 4 at the start, you will know you are already on the journey to better balance. To get as far as 4, you must already have some strategies in place. You will find it useful to think about what these are. Can you can develop them further?

The other benefit of this simple scale is that you can revisit it as you work through this Useful Guide, and at the end you will have a way of measuring what progress you've made.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 2: Out of Balance? What are the Signs?

How it can happen

How can it happen that we become unbalanced, chore-heavy, choice-light, often without fully realising how close we are to exhaustion, depression or some kind of breaking point? Instead we tell others and ourselves we're fine. Or at least OK.

There's no simple answer but two factors are often in play ...

- Becoming out of balance is a gradual process. Imbalance can creep up on you, the 'Work Life Seesaw' (or Scales) leaning too heavily to one side can happen in tiny increments. So slowly we only half notice that coping with all the activities, tasks, people that throng our waking hours is becoming more of a struggle. All our focus is outward as we react to pressures from the outside world, failing to notice what's going on inside. And therefore we don't ask: is the way I'm living healthy? Comfortable? Are the different areas of my life in balance? Am I living well? Other people often notice signs we're out of balance before we do.
- Many of us have a strong desire for Control – which is behind our insistence to ourselves and everyone else that we are coping. We are OK. We are in Control. Recognising that our lives are stressed and out of balance in key ways brings with it a huge fear of losing the Control we set such store by. So frightening is this possibility that we hang on as long as possible to our illusion that we are living well enough, that we are managing just fine.

Two key signs

Though our minds may be insisting that 'everything's fine', our emotions and our bodies will eventually betray us. Two clear signs of imbalance are ...

- **Last straw syndrome:** or an intense outburst of emotion out of all proportion to the apparent cause. All it takes when we're teetering on the edge is one light push. Something goes wrong – our email goes down, a colleague challenges our judgement, a child leaves toys lying around – and suddenly we're over the edge. A blaze of anger. A whoosh of emotion. To others we're over-reacting. What they may not know is that we've been under-reacting for too long, ignoring signs of stress until they refuse to be ignored any longer.
- **Body betrayals:** many of us live in our heads much of the time. Assuming our minds are in charge gives us that sense of Control we

crave. What we don't notice till we're forced to is that our bodies are registering the unease our minds rationalise away. Our digestion is a favourite place for our bodies to react to our unbalanced lives. 'Fluttery tummy', bloating, irritable bowel syndrome can all be ways our bodies try to tell us we are not living well. Our shoulders/neck is another spot our bodies choose to store tension. Permanently hunched shoulders can be another sign of imbalance as can a clenched jaw. Yet we go blithely on, inhabiting our heads and only rarely visiting our bodies, unaware how much tension we are carrying through our daily lives.

Identifying the signs

The questionnaire below has been designed to help you identify signs that may be showing up both in your behaviour and in your thoughts/feelings indicating you may be out of balance and need to make changes if you are to live healthily and well. You may find it useful to involve someone you trust and who knows you well in this exercise. At the end of the chapter is a second version of the questionnaire you can ask them to fill out. You can then compare notes and check if they see signs you don't.

Are you out of balance? The Balance Questionnaire

The questionnaire on the next page is in two parts, Part 1 asks you questions about your behaviour while Part 2 focuses on your thoughts/feelings. In both Parts, for each question tick one of the three columns. Go with your gut feeling as far as you can.

You can do the questionnaire online by clicking [here](#).

Part 1: Behaviour

For Read Our Mind Readers: The following table has 4 columns and 10 rows. Only the left hand cells of rows 2 to 10 have any content.

| | Often | Sometimes | Never/Rarely |
|--|-------|-----------|--------------|
| Do you work and/or do chores for long periods without a break? | | | |
| Do you bring work home/work in the evenings or weekends? | | | |
| Do other people tell you to relax? | | | |
| Do you use expressions such as 'I must', 'I should' 'I need' 'I have to'? | | | |
| Do you react with a sudden burst of emotion when one more thing goes wrong? Are you on a short fuse? | | | |
| Do you agree to do things when you would benefit more from saying no? | | | |
| Do you take things on because you are afraid of annoying or disappointing someone else? | | | |
| Are your shoulders hunched? Do you walk with your head down? | | | |
| Total | | | |

For Read Our Mind Readers: The table has finished.

Part 2: Thoughts/feelings

For Read Out loud Readers: The following table has 4 columns and 11 rows. Only the first row cells of rows 2 to 11 have any content

| | Often | Sometimes | Never/rarely |
|---|-------|-----------|--------------|
| Do you tend to be ahead of yourself, with your mind on the next task as you tackle your current task? | | | |
| Do you take everything very seriously failing to see the funny or lighter side of life? | | | |
| Do you feel guilty or uncomfortable if you are not doing something? | | | |
| Do you operate on 'automatic pilot', wrapped up in your thoughts not noticing what you're actually doing? | | | |
| When you're not working does work or your list of undone chores intrude on your thoughts? | | | |
| On Sunday evenings do you get a sense of dread at the prospect of Monday morning? | | | |
| Do you feel frustrated or impatient whether you show it or not? | | | |
| Do you dream of escaping to a different type of life? | | | |
| Total | | | |
| Total for Part 1 + Part 2 | | | |

For Read Out loud Readers: The table has finished

Interpreting your results

To interpret your results, first, count the number of ticks in each column and record the three totals for Part 1, then for Part 2. Now add the Part 1 and Part 2 scores together for each column.

Compare the scores for each column. Very broadly, the higher your overall score in the Never/Rarely column, the better your balance. Conversely, the higher your overall score in the 'Often' column, the more you are likely to be out of balance and need to take steps to restore your equilibrium. More specifically ...

- **Highest score in the 'Never/Rarely' column:** Though you have some areas of your life that will benefit from attention, it is most likely you are not seriously out of balance. Particularly if you scored 12+. Under 12 and the task for you is to look through the questions where you did answer 'Often' or 'Sometimes' and concentrate on the issues these questions raise as you work through the rest of this Useful Guide.
- **Highest score in the 'Often' column:** The higher your score in this column, the more signs there are that your 'Work Life balance' needs urgent attention. If you scored over 12 in this column, making changes that will ease tension and give you more space to relax and recuperate must be a priority. A score over 6 still indicates an urgent need to make significant changes, particularly if it combines with a 'Sometimes' score over 5.
- **Highest score in the 'Sometimes' column:** A high score in this column could mean the scales are slowly pressing down on the Work side and you are gradually getting out of balance. But only gradually. If your next highest score is 'Never/Rarely' the process is likely to be slow and you may be only just starting to notice. If your next highest score is 'Often', however, the process is likely to be more advanced.

Reflecting on your results

The value of this questionnaire lies not just in your scores but in the detail – the individual signs you identify for yourself from your 'Often' and 'Sometimes' answers. The awareness that begins to dawn as you see how your frequent bouts of impatience or reluctance to say no are contributing to a 'Work Life' imbalance. Which of your answers is most startling for you? What do you realise that you did not see so clearly before? Note any ideas from reflecting on your results in the 'Notes' section at the end of the chapter.

What do others see?

You may already have identified signs of imbalance from filling out the questionnaire and reflecting on the results. But if you found answering difficult and are not sure about your answers, try asking someone who knows you well to fill out the modified version of the questionnaire below substituting your name for X . Then you can compare notes.

There is an online version of this form [here](#). Just email the link to your colleagues/friends/family and their responses will be emailed to you.

Part 1: Behaviour

| | Often | Sometimes | Never/Rarely |
|--|-------|-----------|--------------|
| Does X work and/or do chores for long periods without a break? | | | |
| Does X take work home/work in the evenings or weekends? | | | |
| Do other people tell X to relax? | | | |
| Does X use expressions such as 'I must', 'I should' 'I need' 'I have to'? | | | |
| Does X react with a sudden burst of emotion when one more thing goes wrong? Is X on a short fuse? | | | |
| Does X agree to do things when they would benefit more from saying no? | | | |
| Does X appear to take things on because they are afraid of annoying or disappointing someone else? | | | |
| Are X's shoulders hunched? Do they walk with their head down? | | | |
| Total | | | |

For Read Out loud readers: The form has changed

Part 2: Thoughts/feelings

For Read Out loud Readers: The following table has 4 columns and 10 rows. Only the left hand side of rows 2 to 9 have any content

| | Often | Sometimes | Never/rarely |
|---|-------|-----------|--------------|
| Do you see signs that X tends to be ahead of him/herself, with their mind on the next task as they tackle their current task? | | | |
| Does X take everything very seriously failing to see the funny or lighter side of life? | | | |
| Is X always on the go? Do you see signs they feel guilty or uncomfortable if they are not doing something? | | | |
| Does X appear to operate on 'automatic pilot', wrapped up in their thoughts not noticing what they're actually doing? | | | |
| When X is not working does work or his/her list of undone chores seem to be worrying them? | | | |
| Does X appear to dread the prospect of Monday morning? | | | |
| Do you see signs that X feels frustrated or impatient? | | | |
| Do you see any signs that X dreams of escaping to a different type of life? | | | |
| Total | | | |
| Total for Part 1 + Part 2 | | | |

For Read Out loud Readers: The table has 10 rows

Work Life Imbalance: Summary Checklist

And finally: a summary checklist of 10 signs that could indicate Work Life imbalance ...

- Work dominates thoughts
- Work dominates home life
- Language peppered with 'I shoulds' or expressions of worry
- On a short fuse, quick to explode
- Hunched body
- Difficulty in relaxing
- Thoughts rushing ahead
- Feelings of guilt and/or dread
- Taking on more and more – inability to say no
- Absence of smiles and laughter

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 3: Chores vs Choices

Work Life imbalance is often the result of working very hard at our paid work and/or at home, combined with having a lot on, a non-stop round of tasks, activities, appointments that can give us the feeling of being on a hamster wheel. Trapped. Unable to get off. So near the edge that one more task could drive us over.

And yet, working very hard in itself doesn't have to lead to stress. We've all had times when we've worked flat out for hours, sometimes days on end, painting a room, making a garden, pulling together a project, putting on a show, totally absorbed. We happily keep going and don't feel unbalanced at all.

Similarly, having a lot on doesn't necessarily entail imbalance. We all know people whose lives look full to bursting yet they sail through apparently relaxed.

So what's the difference? How is it that in some circumstances hard work and a full on life can allow us to flourish while in others it can push us out of balance and drive us to exhaustion and stress?

The power of choice

A clue comes from research findings on the causes of workplace stress suggesting that lack of choice and control over work processes may be significant. Suppose whether we feel we have choice or not is a key difference between a packed life that enlivens and a packed life that drains.

To test out this idea think about times you've been hard at work, yet fully absorbed. What do you remember about these times? The answer may be nothing very specific. Maybe a sense of fluidity and flow. When we're completely focused on what we are doing, when there's nowhere else we'd rather be, we can be said to be at choice. Even if we're responding to outside pressure to produce, if we have chosen to meet the demands made on us, fully and sincerely, then we are at choice. This satisfying state of being at choice can apply equally to activities we fully embrace in our paid work and those we do at home.

In contrast, on the hamster wheel, we're stuck. Think about times you've been struggling through life responding to one demand after another. What do you

remember about these times? Days when you're doing what you feel you have to though you'd love to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. Often at such times we're not so much absorbed as scattered, spreading ourselves thin, doing one thing while worrying about all the other chores we haven't had time for. The opposite of being at choice.

Understanding Choices and Chores

Too many chores and too few choices – is that what skews us out of balance? Before we explore this idea further, let's be clear what we mean by choices and chores ...

- **Choices:** what we choose to do, what we fully embrace and give our full attention to, tasks and activities we don't resent or resist. When we are at choice we are inner directed.
- **Chores:** what we have to do, or feel we have to do; tasks and activities we do because they're on the list, demands we have to meet where we don't even consider we might have a choice; chores may sometimes accompanied by a spirit of martyrdom, resistance or resentment: chores can feel imposed by the outer world.

At first sight the solution might seem a simple: choices are the fun things of life and chores the tedious ones. To improve our Work Life balance we need more fun and less tedium.

Sadly, however, it's not that simple. Our lives can't so neatly be divided into choices and chores, fun and tedium, not least because what counts for us as a chore or a choice depends in part at least on the mindset with which we undertake it. If we embrace a task that, on the face of it, seems tedious or difficult – compose an email we've been putting off, for instance, clean the kitchen floor, sort out a computer problem – and if we carry out the task wholeheartedly without resistance, then we are at choice. Similarly, if we do something that seems fun - go to a party, perhaps - because we feel we have to though we'd rather be at home reading a good book, then this apparently fun activity is, for us, a chore. Even if it's a choice for everyone else there.

That's why it's not so simple. Because what might look like a choice can become a chore if we do it in a spirit of just getting through and on to the next item on the list. And a chore can become a choice by our choosing to embrace the task or activity wholeheartedly. Sometimes too what starts as a chore becomes a choice as we stop resisting and begin to engage.

Exploring your Chore/Choice balance

To explore the way your life divides into choices and chores, consider a recent day – yesterday, for instance, or one day this past week. Using the chart below, list tasks, activities, people you spent time with and so on in one or other column: Chore or Choice. You might want to do the exercise twice, once for a weekday and again for a weekend day.

Tips for identifying Chores and Choices

- When you think about the task/activity/appointment, were you fully present and focused (choice) or was your mind elsewhere, on to the next thing to be done, or dreaming about what you'll be doing later (chore)?
- Did the task/activity give (choice) or take away (chore) energy? Chores often drain energy while things you do when feeling at choice may give you a boost especially if you do them between chores.
- Do you associate sighs (chore) or smiles (choice) with the task/activity?
- If the task/activity was something you felt you had to do, what's the answer when you ask yourself why? Was it imposed by others, or actually self-imposed (sometimes our chores are things we believe we have to do without questioning whether this is really the case)
- Was it the right time to do the task/activity or meet the person (choice) or did you do it in spite of being tired or needing a break (chore)?
- Be as honest as you can: it can be hard to admit to yourself how much of your life consists of chores.

| Chore | Choice |
|-------|--------|
| | |

What your results show

Now review your lists: what did your Chore/Choice balance look like on that particular weekday? Weekend day? Which is the longer list? Choices or chores? Are there any surprises? Any cases where what might look like a chore actually turned out to be a choice? Or vice versa?

Looking at your results more closely:

Mostly Choices: This suggests you have a good balance between your inner drives and your outer activity. A good ability to accept the harder sides of life in a positive spirit. If your results show mostly choices yet you still feel out of balance, ask yourself whether you are trying to squeeze too much into your life, whether you are choosing to do too much. Could your choices include more space to reflect, review and unwind?

Mostly Chores: Too many chores suggests that what you feel on the inside does not closely match how you act on the outside. You are very much at the mercy of others and their demands and not nurturing yourself enough. The consequences can be stress, fatigue, frustration. You will benefit from paying more attention to your own needs, considering whether you could eliminate some chores and turn others into choices.

Equally divided between Choices and Chores: Most probably you gain strength from all the times you are at choice to cope with your chores. Could you further improve your life by turning more of your chores into choices? (See Tips at the end of this chapter)

'I don't have time for...'

One reason we often live in a way that is chore-heavy, choice-light is that we push many of our 'choice' activities into the category 'I don't have time for...' In our personal lives these are often creative pursuits, or music, sport, or spending time with special people or in special places, or just relaxing, hanging out. At work they may include 'big picture' thinking, mentoring staff, expanding your knowledge, or discussing new ideas and approaches with inspiring people. Sadly many of us spend much of our lives waiting for life to become clear enough to do more of what we really enjoy but 'don't have time for'. Either that, or when we finally do have time for these enjoyable pursuits we're so exhausted by what we've squeezed into our day that we don't have the energy. The exercise below gets you thinking about all the activities and people that would enrich your life. If only you had the time. Or the energy.

What I'd like more of...at work

Complete the following phrase listing as many answers as come to mind. You're looking for activities, people etc you'd love to include more in your life but don't

because you feel you 'don't have time'. Or when you do have the time, you often don't have the energy:

At work I don't have time/energy for/to:

Now repeat the same exercise , this time for your personal life:

At home, I don't have time/energy for/to:

The aim of this exercise is to remind you of feel-good activities and people that have somehow been squeezed out of your life. Or allowed in only occasionally. To reinforce just how good they make you feel, for each activity or person or place on each list, complete the following:

When I (do x, meet y etc), I feel....

But I can't possibly...

Assuming you now have a list of good feelings associated with activities and people and places you love, you may be motivated to find ways of including more of them in your life. Even if it means dropping some of your chores, you'll start to make changes, perhaps doing less or taking more breaks in a day so you have more 'quality energy' left for the hobbies and interests that are currently squeezed out.

Alternatively, you may be insisting to yourself: 'Yes, it would be great to spend more time on sketching, or blue sky thinking, or coaching my staff or just relaxing, but I really don't have the time. Really I don't'. You can't see any scope for making changes.

If this is your response to the 'I don't have time for' exercise, you might want consider why you resist making beneficial changes. What makes it so difficult to step off the hamster wheel? What obstacles are you putting in the way of being more at choice?

Here are some possibilities ...

- **Fear:** fear can take many forms. One of the commonest is the need for Control mentioned earlier behind which is often a fear that things will fall apart if you don't personally supervise everything. This kind of fear can be a big obstacle to relaxing into a life that is more at choice.
- **Habit:** being constantly busy can become such a habit that we cannot imagine anything different. We may be stressed but it's a stress we're used to. We may resist being more at choice in favour of sticking with what's familiar.
- **Work ethic:** some of us hold a belief, conscious or otherwise, that too much doing what we enjoy is self-indulgent. Chores can make us feel virtuous in a way that being at choice doesn't. This may be why we tire ourselves out with hectically busy days only to find our energy is so depleted we can't really enjoy our leisure pursuits.
- **Other people:** putting other people first can become a habit we don't know how to break. Yes, of course, we have responsibilities for other people both at home and at work. But sometimes our own need to be in control and/or to be needed means we give over our lives to others more than is necessary. Lack of trust in others to do things for themselves: that's another obstacle that can keep us from being more at choice.

Tips for making time for what you 'don't have time for'

- **Prune ruthlessly** – Just as plants need to be regularly pruned to flourish, so too do our over laden lives. Pruning is a radical act: it means cutting away some of what consumes your time to allow what's left to be more comfortable and pleasurable. Make a list of all the responsibilities and activities you could cut away. There will always be some. Remember pruning is healthy. Less is more, leaving you with more 'quality energy' to spend on enjoyable pursuits.
- **Dare not to do:** Experiment. If you're becoming the family chauffeur, step back. Bring in others – your partner, other parents. If you're drowning in email, be ruthless with any that are not centrally important. Dare to delete rather than keep the others hanging around your Inbox.
- **Delegate:** root out the assumption you may be carrying without realising that the buck always stops with you. Develop an 'I'll do this if you'll do that' approach. With everyone.
- **Question:** Everything. Do things have to be the way they are? If particular tasks/activities/people are sapping your energy or overcrowding your life, question whether they really need to be there.

- **Build time out into every day:** if you prune ruthlessly enough, this will be possible. Relearn the art of doing nothing.

The power of doing nothing

Doing nothing is a powerful antidote to stress, so simple we don't appreciate its power to heal. Doing nothing can take many forms, one of which translates as 'doing nothing in particular'. A vegetable grower friend who was taking a few days off over Christmas from harvesting root crops summed it up: 'It's so nice to go out and buy a paper and just be able to sit and read it.' Pottering: that's a way of looking at 'doing nothing in particular'. A Saturday in which the whole family just potters can be more restoring (and enjoyable) than one jam-packed with organised activities. When you are pottering, then you are at choice.

Occasionally we have the good fortune to find a scheduled meeting or other activity cancelled at the last minute. The world offers us the opportunity to do nothing for a while if we can accept the gift without reaching for our phone or laptop. One day the Japanese emperor Hirohito, whose life was one of back-to-back audiences, meetings, inspections and other imperial duties, was driven to a meeting hall for an appointment. When the imperial party arrived, however, the hall was empty. No-one was there.

The emperor walked into the middle of the large, empty hall and stood silently. Then he bowed to the empty space. Smiling he turned to his assistants: 'We must schedule more appointments like this,' he said. 'I haven't enjoyed myself so much in a long time.'

Sitting Still

Doing nothing can also translate into sitting still, closing or lowering your eyes and going inwards. Letting go of everything your mind is holding on to. Settling into yourself. Unclenching your jaw. Unhunching your shoulders. Allowing yourself to sit, undistracted and at peace. This is meditation. A hugely effective antidote to stress. A balancer of unbalanced lives. Try it. Just for 10 minutes to start with. Observe your breathing. Feel the tension fall away. (For more on meditation, see Chapter 10).

The tyranny of 'not wasting time'

The benefits of meditation, or if meditation sounds too esoteric, the benefits of sitting quietly with yourself, are well-documented. Yet we resist. We don't have the time. Or rather, we assume that 'sitting around doing nothing' must be a waste of time.

It is ironic that people whose lives are the most uncomfortably crowded are more likely than others to be in thrall to the tyranny of 'not wasting time'. The idea that time is a precious commodity not to be wasted in idleness is often inculcated in childhood and therefore deeply embedded in many of our psyches. A consequence is that we are cursed with a drive to fill every waking moment, preferably with activities we and the world – we are not just busy, we like to be seen to be busy - deem worthy. So strong is the conviction that time must not be wasted that we try to ensure that others around us don't waste it either. And so we nag and cajole, ordain that doing x is OK while doing y is 'a waste of time', subtly and not so subtly passing on the curse to our children.

The tyranny of 'not wasting time' is a huge obstacle to being at choice. If you are so cursed, releasing yourself will be a challenge. So start small. Try sitting quietly, going into yourself, for just 5 minutes. What are the effects?

Turning Chores into Choices – some tips

- **Do I have to?** Be sure you see why what feels like a Chore is necessary. If it isn't ask yourself: what would be the consequence of not doing it? Sometimes just going through this exercise shows us we actually do want to do whatever it is. And so, as we approach it in a new spirit, it becomes a Choice.
- **If I have to, what's in it for me?** Spelling out the gain from Chores such as cleaning (whether it's kitchen floor or email Inbox), having a difficult conversation (with our boss or a turbulent teenager) or producing an overdue report, can galvanise us and turn the Chore into a Choice.
- **Could I add a fun element?** Liven up chauffeuring with a sing-along or a good conversation; get some input from your most inspiring colleague for the report.
- **Just Do It! And nothing else.** Don't think about anything else while you're doing it. There's something about focusing on one thing that can help you engage and turn a Chore into a Choice.
- **Turn your back on multi-tasking** (keep that ability you've carefully cultivated for doing several things at once for dire emergencies only): Multi-tasking keeps your mind scattered and yourself spread thin. Multi-tasking is about Chores not Choices.
- **Pause for reflection:** Congratulate yourself on how well you're doing. Being kind to yourself can help a Chore be more of a Choice.

- **Come up for air:** One reason we get stressed is that we trudge through our To Do list, one task straight after another. That way, as we get more tired, every task starts to feel like a Chore. Instead, when you finish something, stop. Tune in to how you feel. Review where you are. Walk around for a while. Loosen up. Shake yourself. Already the next task will feel more like a Choice.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own that you want to capture.

Chapter 4: How Do You Want It To Be?

When you're stressed and out of balance you just want things to be better. But better how? Less pressure, maybe. And more what? How will you know when things are right? What signs will you notice that show you've achieved a better Chore/Choice, Work Life balance?

How will I know? This is a question we don't normally ask ourselves. What will be the signs on the inside, in the way I feel when I wake up each day, that will tell me I'm now OK? And yet it is an important question. In particular because we are often much clearer what we want to get away from – the stressful way things are at the moment – than what we want to move towards.

Meta programmes

This opposition between 'Moving away from' and 'Moving towards' is an example of what, in the field of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), is called a meta programme. The idea is that in the course of our lives we all, largely unconsciously, develop a whole set of meta programmes, ways of sorting and organising our experience, patterns of thinking and behaviour that become automatic. These patterns, or ways of seeing and interpreting the world, are highly influential, affecting the way we act and react, largely without our realising it.

Meta programmes show up in the way we behave and can be thought of as reflecting the motivation or drives behind our behaviour. They can often be expressed as an opposition between two extremes or as a scale. Take as an example a scale we might label: Necessity – Possibility. At one end of the scale, being driven by what has to or ought to be done suggests our meta programme is one of 'necessity', while being motivated by what could be, what is new and unknown, suggests we may, at the other end of the scale, be operating according to a meta programme of 'possibility.'

There is no right or wrong here – we will all be somewhere on the 'necessity-possibility' scale, either tending towards the 'necessity' end (language peppered with 'I should', 'I ought to' 'I have to' is a sign that 'necessity' is dominant) or the 'possibility' end (talking much more about wishes, hopes, choices, options). The important point is that our particular meta programme will influence how we think and behave, and the choices we believe we have.

People whose meta programme is towards the 'necessity' end of the 'necessity-possibility' scale will have more difficulty in choosing not to do things they feel they ought to than those towards the 'possibility' end. They may find it harder to say no, and therefore be liable to take on too many obligations. These then become more 'shoulds' and the load gets heavier. To break the cycle, the more awareness we can develop, particularly of those meta programmes where we are at either of the extremes of the scale, the more choices we open up for making changes.

Moving away from - Moving towards

We mentioned earlier that when life feels tough we are often clearer what we don't want – the way life is at the moment – than what we do want. If we now think of 'Moving away from – Moving towards' as a scale, tending towards the 'Moving towards' end of the scale suggests a meta programme of being motivated by things that attract you whereas tending towards the 'Moving away from' end implies a meta programme of avoidance, of being motivated by the need to escape from what feels difficult or unpleasant.

People who are stressed and out of balance are often those operating within a 'moving away from' meta programme. While 'moving towards' people will know what they want even if they are not sure how to get it, those stuck on the hamster wheel are more likely to be 'moving away from' people, knowing they don't want to be there but not sure where they want to be instead.

Where are you on the 'Moving Away From - Moving Towards' scale? Mark your position.

Moving Away From

Moving Towards

What are some of the consequences of the way this particular meta programme plays out in your life?

The Miracle Question

If you're out of balance, getting some clarity as to what you are moving towards, clarity as to how it will be for you when you're in better balance, is a crucial step in the direction of change. Without such clarity you're on a journey with only the vaguest of destinations.

When I'm coaching and want to help a client gain insight into how they want things to be, insight into the signs that will show them they are on track to make the changes they need to, I sometimes ask the Miracle Question. I learnt about the Miracle Question at a seminar on solutions-focused Brief Coaching, an approach to coaching adapted from Solutions-focused Brief Therapy (for more on Brief Coaching click [here](#)).

If you had come to me for a coaching session and had told me about your problems with Work Life balance my version of the Miracle Question might go something like this:

Suppose you went to sleep tonight and in the night a miracle occurred, the miracle being that all the things you've brought to this session are solved. You don't know a miracle has occurred but when you wake up you're aware of the consequences. Things are different. How do you feel? How do you react differently?

Though I've asked the question many times, the answers people give are often similar. Essentially what many people notice when they wake up and the issues worrying them are removed is a sense of inner peace. They express this sense in different ways: I feel calm; my anxiety is gone; I feel peaceful..... And for some, linked to this inner peace is an opening of possibilities. 'I feel lighter, motivated to get up and get on'. A sense of moving towards.

You can ask yourself a Miracle Question, taking your lack of Work Life balance as the problem that is solved by the miracle occurring:

Suppose I go to sleep tonight and in the night a miracle occurs, the miracle being that all the things I'm worrying about are solved. I don't know a miracle has occurred but when I wake up I'm aware of the consequences. Things are different. How do I feel? How do I react differently?

Write you answer here: (when printed)

What your answer brings out is the kind of inner change you would experience if your life were in better balance. But what about on the outside? What might other people, particularly those closest to you, notice that's different about you?

Write your answer here: (when printed)

Exercise in visualisation

You now have the beginnings of a destination, you know better how you'd feel and you have some idea what others might notice that's different about you. But suppose we were to go further. Suppose you were to imagine, to visualise, a day when life is more the way you want it. A day when you, your life and your work are nicely balanced. Take a few minutes to sit quietly and tune in to your mind. When you're ready, take one of the numbered stages below at a time and give your answer. Or, better still, ask a trusted friend to talk you through each stage.

Just imagine ...

1. You wake up in the morning in this new life. Where are you? In the home you live in now, or somewhere else?
2. How are you feeling as you wake with the prospect of a day ahead the way you want it?
3. You're having breakfast. What is the atmosphere in your household today? What kind of energy are you bringing to the breakfast table? To the morning routine?
4. You get ready for work. What are you looking forward to?
5. You're setting off for work. Are you heading for your present place of work, or another? Or are you working at home?

6. If you are going out to work how do you travel? By car? On foot? Public transport? Does anyone go with you?
7. You arrive at work. How are you feeling about the prospect of the day? Who is there? What's the first thing you do when you get in?
8. And when you get started, what are you doing? With whom? How is your energy? What are you enjoying? How are you using your talents?
9. How long do you work before taking a break? How do you recharge? What do you choose to get on with next? What's giving you the most satisfaction in this new life?
10. It's lunchtime. Where do you have lunch? Who with? What do you do to relax?
11. How is the afternoon? What is it about this day that is different from your current days? What makes it a day with things the way you want them?
12. Afternoon turns to early evening. How are you feeling now? When do you stop work? How does your 'day the way you want it' end?
13. How are things when you go home? With your partner? The family? What's different about the evening in your new life? Do you stay in or go out?
14. What do you feel at the end of this day? How has it been different?

Your imagination, your ability to see in your mind's eye how things might be, is a powerful agent for change. In a life that's already over-busy it might seem a luxury too far to take time out to sit quietly and imagine the way you'd like to live. It might even seem a waste of time. We saw in Chapter 3 how tyrannical the prohibition on wasting time can be. But if we don't make the imaginative leap that opens up for us, specifically and in detail, how we want it to be – how do we think we're going to get there?

The ah-ha moment

The big learning, the ah-ha moment, comes when we finally realise that change is within our power. We may be stressed, chore-heavy, Work Life imbalanced, but no-one is going to ride to the rescue and present us with a solution. How could they? What's right for one person isn't necessarily right for another. We, each of us, individually need to go inside ourselves and explore what's out of balance and needs to change. Using our imagination to visualise what a changed daily life might look like is one technique we might try. The result is a vision

which is our own, a path we have chosen because it corresponds to a life in balance for us. A vision we can use to guide the decisions we will then need to make on what to drop and what to add in order to rebalance our lives.

Holding your vision

If you are persuaded that using your imagination to visualise how you'd like it to be is worthwhile, you might want to try the visualisation exercise again tomorrow. Notice whether the resulting vision is the same as the first time round, or have new elements been added in? What are you learning about what you really want that you didn't know before? Is there anything that has surprised you?

If you can hold on to your vision, it will inspire you with the courage to start making the changes you can see are needed. Choose something to act as a reminder - a photograph, an object, an inspiring quote on your computer home page. Make sure your reminder is somewhere prominent so you'll see it regularly. It's only too easy to have good intentions but do nothing, convincing yourself things aren't so bad, falling back into the comfort of familiar patterns. By choosing a powerful reminder you reinforce your commitment to change.

One small step

Show yourself you are serious: Identify one small step you can take, one small change you can make – today – to begin to work towards your vision.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 5: Getting Down to Basics

By now you will be aware that improving your Work Life balance so you are less chore-heavy, more choice-light requires you to go inside and explore some of your basic assumptions and beliefs. We've seen how influential these can be, how we all internalise meta programmes that affect the way we think and behave often without us realising. We've also seen that Work Life balance is an individual matter: balance for you will be different to balance for your colleague in the next office. Where you may be weighed down with obligations (reflecting perhaps a 'necessity' meta programme), he may be in thrall to a need for control. For both, becoming aware of what may be driving you is an important first step. But what you do to lighten the weight of obligations will be different to what he does to begin to let go of control.

In Chapter 1 I suggested there are many different factors which can contribute to an overall feeling of Work Life imbalance. In this chapter we are going to explore some of these forces to help you see how far one or more of them may be influencing you.

Symptom vs Source

A way of looking at it is to see your experience that life is uncomfortably pressured as a symptom. And symptoms have a cause, a source. When we go to the doctor we report our symptoms but a skilled doctor probes further looking for the possible source of our illness. In this chapter we are also probing further, looking for possible sources of imbalance. These can be found by exploring the choices we make to do more of this or less of that, by examining our beliefs and assumptions, by recognising our tendencies to operate in this way or that.

Here are some examples to play with. The aim here is not to provide any right or wrong answers but rather to help you explore how you've been thinking, believing, living along a number of different scales. What you're looking for as you work through is a spark of recognition: yes, that's me. That could be a big factor in why I feel so overwhelmed. Maybe that's where I need to make a change.

Doing vs Being

You've probably heard the saying: 'We're human beings not human doings', recited sometimes by people who sound a tiny bit smug. So what's wrong with Doing? you may say. What's so great about Being?

Suppose I ask you to look at the scale below with Doing at one extreme and Being at the other.

Doing

Being

Where would you place yourself on the scale? Do you tend more towards the Doing or the Being end?

As you consider, notice your feelings. How are you reacting? Are you engaged or starting to switch off thinking: 'Not this Doing-Being stuff again. I know all this. It's boring.' If you are switching off, note your reaction but stay with me.

One reason for a negative reaction is that our culture revolves around Doing. The classic question we ask a new acquaintance at a party is 'What do you do?' A friend's husband was retiring: 'What's he going to do?' she was always being asked. The To Do list itself is a very Western concept. Because our culture rewards Doing, many of us have bought into the idea that Doing is what we are here for, that Doing is virtuous and Not Doing a reason for guilt. And therefore anything that suggests we may be leaning too far in a Doing direction can feel like an attack on our whole approach to life and consequently raise our defences. But suppose we lower our defences and approach exploring the Doing-Being scale with an open mind.

First, what do we mean by Doing? Here are some possible elements ...

- Performing tasks: at the extreme end of the scale, one after the other without breaks. At work and at home. A life dominated by 'things to do' – a constant To Do list, real or in the head.
- Busying about: always on the go and chivvying others to be on the go too. Looking for tasks. Constantly switched on. Even at leisure, needing to have 'something to do'.
- Focusing on achievement: What have I done/achieved today? Consciously or unconsciously justifying existence by showing what's been achieved (adding an item to your To Do list that you've already done just so you can tick it off is one sign!).
- Judging others by what they achieve.
- Mind constantly active with the current activity/task or planning the next one or the one after that.

And Being? Less visible, Being is more difficult to characterise but elements might include:

- Being able to sit still and quieten your mind (or walk for the pure pleasure of it, again with a quiet mind)
- A willingness to go inwards and check in with whatever emotions and thoughts and feelings are swirling around there. Taking the time to really experience them.
- A focus on experiencing rather than achieving. Being with what's happening now long enough to fully experience it.
- An ability to take time to savour.

More generally, at the Doing end of the scale is a tendency to be permanently switched on, mind active with plans, problems and projects, outer-focused, constantly responding to demands, real or imagined, from the world.

At the Being end is more of a tendency to be inner-focused and directed, able to accept and be with whatever is going on inside, pleasant or unpleasant, without seeking to be distracted. An awareness of the need to refresh yourself. An ability to simply be.

Test yourself

To see where you might stand on the Doing/Being axis, read the following statements. For each one think about how far it reflects your own view then give it a mark depending on how far you agree/disagree. 1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree.

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| I like to keep busy | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Queuing really annoys me | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I hate wasting time | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I rarely sit still for long | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| As soon as I wake I start to plan my day | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| My mind is always active | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| There's never enough time to do all I have to do | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I find it hard to relax | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your results

Now add up your score for each question to get a total score. Essentially the higher your total score, the closer you are likely to be to the Doing end of the Doing/Being scale. A score between 30 and 40 suggests that Doing dominates your life. You may be unaware of or not appreciate the value of relaxing tension and refreshing yourself regularly. Between 20 and 30 the balance for you is still weighted towards Doing. Though you are more aware of the need to let go and relax regularly you probably find 'not doing' difficult. Between 15 and 20 suggests your Doing is well-balanced by your ability to Be while under 15 you are near the extreme Being end.

Shifting the balance

Though being too heavily weighted towards Being can give rise to its own problems, too much Doing is more likely to be a factor in Work Life imbalance. Doing can, of course, be exciting and stimulating, so much so that Doers often fear boredom if they have 'nothing to do'. But too much Doing can become wearing, what looked like choices becoming chores, lots of energy flowing out, not much coming in. That's when we get that 'stop the world I want to get off' feeling. For many of us, therefore, shifting the balance away from Doing and towards Being, even by just a few points on the scale, can reduce our stress and greatly improve the quality of our lives.

To start this shift: instead of constantly focusing on plans, problems and projects, try ...

- **Stopping:** Call a halt to both action and thought. Unclench your jaw. Unhunch your shoulders. Simply take 2 minutes of time out. Repeat at intervals during the day. Don't underestimate the value of refreshing yourself by reducing tension even for a short time.
- **Sifting:** Review your schedule and choose one or two items to remove – yes, really. Remove. This will liberate some time for you to do some:
- **Savouring:** From your lunchtime sandwich (actually register the taste – and if there isn't much, register that too and aim to make a better choice next time) to the pleasure you feel from meeting a deadline. Break the habit of rushing on to the next thing before you've fully experienced this one.

Teach Us To Sit Still

'*Doing* cancels out *being* as noise swamps silence' wrote novelist Tim Parks in 'Teach Us To Sit Still: A sceptic's search for health and healing' (Harvill Secker). Parks suffered increasing pelvic pain that he tried to ignore through working

hard, constantly Doing. After many doctors and no clear diagnosis, he slowly came to realise (aided by a book with the intriguing title of 'A Headache in the Pelvis') that his pain was caused by chronic tension built up over many busy years. Highly sceptical of all things alternative, he nevertheless began to experiment with relaxation and meditation, gradually increasing his capacity for letting go and just Being. To his amazement in this way he gradually got rid of his physical pain.

You and your Body

As Tim Parks found, sooner or later imbalances in the way we live show up in our bodies, often taking us by surprise. Gradually we become aware of digestive upsets or back pain or headaches and it slowly dawns on us that all is not well. Living in an urban culture with computer and mobile phone screens for company, we can be remarkably out of touch with our bodies only taking notice when they force themselves on our attention by going wrong.

A good Work Life balance will include a healthy, well functioning body that we look after with well-chosen food, fresh air and exercise. That at any rate is the ideal which most of us fail to reach. Instead we take our bodies for granted, ignoring the messages they offer us: tense muscles, shallow breathing, indigestion, dull eyes, heavy head. Much more than we generally realise, physical factors are in play when we are out of balance. These can take a number of forms. For example, we may be somewhere on the scale of ...

- **Aware-Unaware**, or we might say, **Conscious-Unconscious** of what's going on in our bodies. We don't tune in to our bodies not because they are working perfectly but because our attention is elsewhere. And therefore we may not notice that tension is building up or we're holding our breath or our stomach is bloated. The danger here is that if these body messages are not heeded, if these symptoms are not noticed and relieved, they may result in more serious illness. What is sometimes called 'being out of touch with our bodies' is most common in people who operate mainly from the head.

Signs that we may be lost in our heads, barely present to what's going on in our bodies include: jaw almost permanently clenched (many of us unconsciously clench our jaw when we are thinking, and those of us with very active minds are forever thinking!); hunched shoulders; tuning out/'putting off noticing' discomfort (as in – 'that hurts but I'm too busy to bother with it now'); walking with your head down on automatic pilot;

irritation with others (often our family) who notice physical signs of stress and want us to take notice too; pushing yourself and continuing to work even when feeling unwell. Do any of these apply to you?

How would you score yourself?

Conscious

Unconscious

- **Active-inactive:** our bodies are meant to move yet our lives are increasingly sedentary. Unless we make a conscious effort to counteract the sedentary with regular movement, we can soon find ourselves at the 'Inactive' end of the scale. As we get older our bodies operate according to a 'use it or lose it' principle. If we sit for long days in the office our backs stiffen and we gradually lose suppleness; if we drive everywhere instead of walking, our muscles weaken and we lose lower body strength. We can regain suppleness, of course, through yoga, say, just as we can regain muscle tone and strength through jogging or sport or brisk walks. But we have to want to. And if our lives already feel packed to bursting, we are likely to feel we just 'don't have the time' for the exercise that will give us back what we are losing.

Signs we may be near the 'Inactive' end of the 'Active-Inactive' scale include: excuses for not exercising (such as: 'I would exercise if I had the time'...'it's quicker to take the car'...'if I cycled to work I'd arrive all sweaty'... 'I know I should take more exercise but...'); knowing that when you're mentally weary, doing something physical – jogging, dancing, brisk walking – can restore your energy yet feeling so worn out at the end of the day as not to be able to motivate yourself; automatically assuming you'll go by car even for walkable distances; never even considering walking up an escalator or choosing stairs over a lift; the idea of walking three miles (one hour) or having a gentle game of tennis would be unthinkable.... What signs can you add? Do you recognise yourself at all here?

How would you score yourself?

Active

Inactive

- **Considerate-harsh** (with our bodies): some people are kind to their bodies, treating them with respect while others are less kind subjecting themselves to harsh diets and exercise regimes then blaming themselves for failing to stick to them. Or they abuse their bodies overdoing the alcohol or drugs or cigarettes, or depriving them of sleep. Or sometimes over-exercising as though they are punishing their bodies. The Considerate-Harsh scale is one we may be barely conscious of yet where we are on the scale can affect the degree of tension with which we live.

At the Considerate end we are living in tune with our bodies, aware of how to nurture our physical selves, of the effects of what we eat and drink, the need for plenty of sleep and a mix of activity and relaxation. People at that end of the scale are unlikely to be seriously out of balance. As we move towards the Harsh end, however, we enter the yo-yoing realm of unhealthy habits: we drink too much, our bodies don't like it and so we resolve to cut back. Our bodies recover, we relax our vigilance, and the whole cycle begins again. We sleep too little because we have so much on so we decide we really must get to bed earlier. We feel better, we stay up later and before long it's back to Facebook at midnight. We feel we're too fat, we 'must go on a diet' and so food becomes a struggle with our will. At the Harsh end we are constantly struggling with our bodies in one way or another. As a result our relation with our bodies is one of tension which can contribute to our feeling of imbalance.

Signs that we may be at the Harsher end of the Considerate-Harsh scale include: regular excess (of food, drink, partying) followed by extreme self-denial; always looking for the diet that will really work; associating feelings of guilt with certain types of food/drink but having them anyway; often feeling dissatisfied with your body, wanting it to be some other way. Does any of this apply to you?

How would you score yourself?

Considerate

Harsh

Shifting the balance

These are just a few of the ways your relation with your body can affect your feeling of balance/imbalance. Don't be surprised if you hadn't realised how you have been treating your body. As Tim Parks reports: 'I was amazed, when someone showed me a way back to health, to realise that I knew nothing of my body at all, nothing of its resources, nothing of its oneness with my mind, nothing of myself.' Our culture, with its constant barrage of advertising, encourages over-consumption and excess while labour saving devices from dishwashers to remote controls keep us longer in our seats. The effects of ill-treating our bodies over a long time can creep up on us. But once we're aware, we can start treating our bodies better and feel the resulting gains in health and well-being.

Tips to help you treat your body better

- **Regularly check in with your physical self:** Really inhabit your body. Scan your body for tension from your toes to the top of your head. Pay special attention to your buttocks, upper back and shoulders, neck, facial muscles especially your jaw. Wherever you feel tension, bring your attention to the muscles that are tense then release them, consciously let go. Do this exercise frequently and you will learn where in your body you tend to hold tension. That way, when you're tired or anxious you'll be able to home straight in and release your tension thereby relieving your symptoms and restoring physical well-being.
- **Breathe more smoothly:** Sit quietly and tune in to your breathing. Simply observe your breath, in and out, listen to the sound it makes in your head. As you sit and follow your breath you'll feel calmer and more relaxed. Now try taking deeper breaths. Start by focusing your attention low down in your abdomen, breathe in so your abdomen rises (you can put your hand there and feel it rise or lie on the floor and feel the rise). Then feel the breath rise up into your lungs as high as you can go, feel your chest rising as you draw in oxygen. Now breathe out feeling your chest fall as your lungs contract. As your out-breath descends, gently pull your abdomen back towards your spine as you completely empty your lungs. Then start the whole process again. This is known as long, deep breathing. This kind of breathing can help you feel calm and gain energy and alertness as you take in more oxygen. Another tool you can use whenever the tension is rising.
- **Stretch:** Counteract the tendency to hunch up over your computer or phone screen by getting up regularly and stretching. Stand up, feet together or hip width apart. Shoulders down away from your ears. Arms by your sides, pulling gently towards the floor. Now slowly raise your arms

above your head, pull your arms upwards but keep your shoulders away from your ears, down your back. This way you're in balance pulling upwards while being well rooted at the same time. Nicely elongating your spine. After 30 seconds or so lower your arms. Repeat twice more.

- **Move:** This is the most important of all: remember, our bodies are meant to move. At work, get up and walk about regularly. Understand the way moving can shift your thoughts and help you see different solutions to problems or others' point of view. If you do nothing else to improve your Work Life balance, Move. Unstick yourself by building regular movement into your daily life. We're not talking about 'taking exercise' here – we're talking about simply moving: standing up, walking around, running upstairs, being the one who goes out for the sandwiches, introducing daily dynamism into your sedentary existence. Your body deserves it!
- **Refresh your body:** Some of us treat our bodies like machines that can go on and on. In fact our bodies need time to repair themselves, and for that we need to allow space for lie-ins, relaxation, maybe a massage. With our Puritan work ethic we can sometimes feel self-indulgent for taking a siesta or lounging in a sauna. But if you're out of balance there's even more reason to be kind to your body and allow it to repair itself as you enjoy some extra sleep.

What kind of activity will bring you more in touch with your body?

Almost all forms of physical activity (running; martial arts; sports such as squash or football; yoga; kyudo; dancing, or whatever you choose) will change your life for the better. The trick is to choose ones that attract you. There must be pleasure in it somewhere, be it from challenging yourself as runners working up to marathons do, for example, or from losing yourself in the rhythm of a dance or the focus of a yoga posture, or from the camaraderie of playing in a team. When deciding what physical activity to add into your life, here are some factors to consider ...

- **Alone or with others?** Alone and you might prefer to go jogging or work through a tailored gym programme; if you gain pleasure and/or inspiration from activities with others a team sport or class, or running buddy might work better.
- **Cardiovascular workout or flexibility?** For cardiovascular exercise there's lots to choose from including running, dancing, zumba, cycling, brisk walking, swimming, squash...you can add more choices yourself. If increased flexibility is your aim then try activities such as yoga, Pilates, tai chi.
- **Free or paying?** The great outdoors is a wonderful place to get fit for free if you don't mind getting wet or cold from time to time; if you prefer

warmth and/or instructors and/or equipment then you will normally have to pay.

- **Indoor or outdoor?** Why not try a mix of both – jogging or cycling with perhaps a game of squash or a Pilates class.
- **Fixed or variable times?** Do you want to be free to exercise when you choose or will you be more motivated by having a time for football practice or a yoga class in your diary?
- **How fit are you at the start?** Start gently if you are not used to taking exercise. And consult your doctor if you have any worries at all about whether taking exercise will be good for you. Your heart and lungs in particular need to be in good shape.

And finally ...

- Add some spice by trying something different – aikido, tai chi, Nordic walking...there's just so much out there!
- Vary your exercise programme – change your routine regularly, do a combination of different activities to keep up your interest.
- Get yourself a buddy – a partner or supporter, someone to share your progress, setbacks and eventual triumphs.

You and Time

Your relation to time can be another area to explore when looking beyond symptoms towards a possible source of your Work Life imbalance. In Chapter 4 we introduced the idea of meta programmes from the field of NLP. One such meta programme relates to the way we orient ourselves in time: on this view people can experience time very differently. For instance, two contrasting ways people may be said to organise their experience of time are ...

- **In-time:** people with this orientation may experience time as a line extending behind them to the past through the present and stretching out in front of them to the future. They themselves are usually on this line, in the present, fully 'in the moment'. For them planning ahead, especially far ahead, can seem unreal so engrossed are they in the now, the future seeming far out in front. One risk they may face is being overwhelmed by all the detail of the present moment.
- **Through-time:** This kind of overwhelm is much less of a risk for people whose orientation may be said to be 'through-time'. These people may experience time as a line just in front of them stretching from left to right, most commonly with the past to the left, future to the right. This orientation means they can more easily review time, see the sweep of

past to future and may be better able than 'in-time' people to plan and organise. Not actually being themselves on the time-line, 'through-time' people may be more detached and can find it harder to be fully present and get into things.

Focus on the future

Neither of these ways of experiencing time is better than the other. They are simply different. And one of the key differences lies in perception of the future. As we've seen, 'in-time' people are often present-focused. For them the future can seem remote. The 'through-time' people have a clearer view of the sweep of time, including the future and may be better planners. They may view the future in a perfectly healthy way, or they may be nervously looking ahead, imagining all sorts of possible problems that need to be guarded against.

For all of us, wherever we are in our orientation to time, there are both healthy and less healthy ways of engaging with the future. Healthy ways include ...

- Formulating goals, clarifying your aims and how you might get there
- Prioritising tasks rather than working piecemeal
- Looking forward to fun/interesting/stimulating activities
- Planning when you'll do what, scheduling, anticipating possible hitches

Some less healthy/more stressful ways of approaching the future include ...

- Constantly scanning the horizon for potential problems
- Lots of 'what if' thinking, coming up with 'worst-case scenarios' that will probably never happen
- When some problem does arise in the present, immediately seeing possible future disastrous consequences (assuming the worst will happen)
- Going over and over future scenarios in your mind to try and cover all possible hitches

Planning vs worrying

We need to plan ahead, of course, but for some of us planning for the future goes hand in hand with worrying about what might go wrong. Suppose we imagine healthy and less healthy ways of engaging with the future as sitting at either end of a scale where Planning is at one end and Worrying at the other:

Planning

Worrying

Where would you place yourself on this scale?

Test yourself

To get a clearer idea try this test: read the following statements. For each one think about how far it reflects your own view then give it a mark depending on how far you agree/disagree. 1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I like to think ahead | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I feel very exposed if I'm not well prepared | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I find it safer to assume the worst | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I like to see possible problems before they arise | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I don't like to be taken by surprise | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I often wake thinking about possible problems | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Things often work out better than I expect | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| People often tell me to 'stop worrying' | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your results

Add up your score for each question to get a total score. The higher your total score, the closer you are likely to be to the Worrying end of the scale. A score between 30 and 40 suggests that viewing the future as a potential disaster area dominates your life. You spend a lot of time trying to avert disasters that never happen. Between 20 and 30 the balance for you is still weighted towards assuming the worst. Though you are less in thrall to the stresses of disaster thinking you are still liable to see the future as threatening. Between 15 and 20 suggests your Planning is reasonably well-balanced while under 15 you are likely to be a healthy Planner.

Shifting the balance

Excessive worrying can underlie Work Life imbalance by occupying your head with negative thoughts for much of the time. Worrying also depletes energy thereby increasing fatigue. Strategies to help you move down the scale, even a few points, from the less healthy Worrying end to the healthier Planning end include ...

- **Catch yourself** and pull back: learn to spot disaster thinking as soon as it arises. Acknowledge it ('there I go again, disaster-thinking!') and consciously decide not to allow your mind to go along that track. Divert your mind in a different direction.
- **Learn to laugh** at your wilder 'worst-case scenario' thinking: take a step back and smile at the inventiveness you show in coming up with worst case scenarios. Can you direct some of that inventiveness into more creative pursuits?
- **Remind yourself** of all the things you feared would go wrong but didn't: do regular reality checks and acknowledge what's gone right.

Self vs Other Focused

Another NLP meta programme relates to whether your main focus of attention is on yourself or on others. Are we more inward leaning, evaluating from own perspective or are we more outer directed, concerned with how events will affect other people? Again neither is right or wrong, just different. At the extreme end, however, sorting your experience with reference to yourself alone can mean you end up as selfish, even narcissistic. At the other end of the scale, organising your experience with your focus of attention solely on others can mean you're always trying to please everyone else ignoring your own needs.

Being primarily other-focused, particularly if you are near the extreme end of the scale, can result in being pulled in all directions with no idea of what you want or where you'd like to be. For some people this focus on others' demands at the expense of our own needs can be a possible source of imbalance.

Test yourself

How far are you other-focused? Read the following statements. For each one think about how far it reflects your own view then give it a mark depending on how far you agree/disagree. 1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree.

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| I'm most happy when everyone around me is happy | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I like to be helpful | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I sometimes wish people would show more appreciation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I avoid conflict | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I am sensitive to others' feelings | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I'm often the first to step in when help is needed | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I wait for others to speak before I give my opinion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I'm usually happy to go along with what others want | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your results

Add up your score for each question to get a total score. The higher your total score, the more you put others before yourself. Though, in moderation, putting others first can be a positive quality, a score between 30 and 40 suggests that you are taking it to extremes. The result may well be that you are unaware of, and therefore not taking care of, your own needs. Between 20 and 30 the balance for you is still weighted towards others and what they think and want. Though you may sometimes assert yourself you are still more used to giving way to what others demand from you. Between 15 and 20 suggests you are reasonably well-balanced between attention to self and others while under 15 suggests you are highly self-focused.

Shifting the balance

Being too self-focused will, of course, bring its own problems. Being extremely other-focused, however, is more likely to be a contributor to Work Life imbalance. Strategies for shifting from putting yourself last to giving yourself greater priority include ...

- **Think before you volunteer:** does it always have to be you who steps up to the plate? Are others taking advantage of your helpfulness to avoid

doing their share? Does whatever you're offering to do actually suit your life/schedule? If not why are you offering?

- **Get used to making choices** and saying what you want: get a trusted friend to help you work through options and get clear what's right for you.
- **Learn that it's OK to say No** (for more on saying No, see Chapter 9).

Summing Up – Tips for getting closer to the source of your Work Life imbalance

- Get used to probing beyond symptoms: the more awareness you gain about what is really going on for you, the more likely you are to see what changes to your life will be most beneficial.
- Make a habit of checking in with yourself: you'll find probing easier if you check in with yourself regularly. Bring into your conscious awareness your feelings, how your body is, your assumptions ...
- Think about the scales we have been exploring in the chapter ...
 - Doing-Being
 - Active-Inactive
 - Planning-Worrying
 - Self-Other focused

If you recognise yourself in any of the signs, probe further. What can you change that will benefit your well-being?

- Use what we've suggested to think about other possible sources of your symptoms. What else might be affecting you? Remember that Work Life balance is individual. The source for you will be different to the source for your neighbour.
- Enjoy your growing awareness: it means you're already more at choice.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 6: On Addictions

By now you will have gained some insight into what's behind your sense of imbalance between Work and Life, between chores and choices. You'll also have some inkling of what you could change to allow you to feel more at choice.

So far, so good. Or is it? If we know what's bad for us surely we stop doing it, and if we know what's good for us we do that instead. Don't we? And of course sometimes the answer is Yes: we become aware of our tiring habit of going on too long without breaks, for instance, so we begin taking regular time out to refresh ourselves and life becomes sweeter.

But sometimes the answer is No. We know we need to assert ourselves so as not to have too much work dumped on us yet we continue to say 'OK, leave it with me, I'll do it'. We know we are short of sleep and need to get to bed earlier, but somehow we still stay up.

Between our awareness of what's wrong and our good intentions about putting it right are often some powerful obstacles. In these next chapters we'll be looking at some of these barriers to our well-being and some strategies for getting over them.

Virtuous addictions

Let's start with what we might call 'virtuous addictions' to distinguish them from more obviously harmful addictions such as alcohol or drug dependency. 'Virtuous addictions' can creep into our lives and wrap their tentacles around us without us even noticing. The activities they draw us into are useful, positive, rewarding and often enjoyable in moderation. But they can insidiously take over our lives and throw us out of balance if not kept in check.

Currently one of the most widespread 'virtuous addiction' is to being switched on, to being connected. Not so many years ago the primary, and almost the only, way to get an instant connection to someone was to ring them on their landline. Three way calling and conference calling came along, meaning a few more people could be added in to the conversation. But when the call was over, it was over. You disconnected. That was it till the next call.

Not any more. Technology has moved swiftly on and with it has come huge versatility in ways of connecting. We can text quickly and constantly, have immediate access to email and the internet wherever we are, continually comment on the minutiae of life, ours and other people's, through Facebook, Twitter and the like, chat online, share pictures from our mobile phones, collect apps and let Wikipedia inform our lives.

These are 'virtuous' technologies in the sense that they are extremely useful. Who'd want to go back to only landlines when you're running late and can text your apologies ahead and shift the time of the meeting? Who doesn't appreciate being able to pick up emails anytime, anywhere, particularly when you're away from the office for a while and need to keep in the loop? Or the possibility of keeping in touch through sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn with people who might otherwise fade out of your life?

How addiction can creep up

Addiction can come from the way this constant contact draws you in and begins to dominate your life. When you can't resist playing with your mobile phone in meetings thinking no-one notices, or tweeting or texting or chatting online at all hours of the day and night. Some of the drivers drawing us in include ...

- enjoyment: we love that feeling of being in demand, our phone always at the ready to receive a text/call/tweet (how many of those calls on the train and in the street are strictly necessary?); the urge to connect, to text or make a call ourselves if we haven't received one for a while. A state of constant alertness anticipating contact.
- fear we might miss something if we switch off and ignore our Facebook wall or other people's photos. A need to stay connected because everyone else is, or seems to be.
- feeling important, leading to the temptation to deal with whatever comes in via our phone or laptop immediately however late, however inconvenient – the assumption that replying or taking action straight away is crucial.
- feeling exposed if we are not connected (what if something happens/someone needs me); we can eventually find it hard not to be able to get in touch with children or partner leading to unnecessary worry and anxiety.

Why does it matter?

The possibility of being connected so widely and easily has huge potential for increasing our choices and improving our well-being. Being able to share information instantly has well-documented public and private benefits. And yet - if we are constantly switched on choices can gradually turn into chores and our well-being can start to decrease as a result of ...

- increasing tension: through always being either connected or open to being contacted. For example, if we continue to receive and respond to work emails at weekends or in the evenings, we are never 'off-duty' and therefore never totally relaxed.
- stiff joints and reduced fitness: as we hunch over screens, small and large, for long periods without a break. When we are on Facebook or chatting online or engrossed in emails we're living completely in our heads, unaware of the effect on our bodies. Tim Parks expresses it dramatically in 'Teach Us To Sit Still': 'Texting, mailing, chatting, blogging, our modern minds devour our flesh.'
- short attention span/monkey mind through habits such as: sidetracking into checking Twitter or emails if what we're supposed to be doing isn't gripping enough (or even if it is, not being able to resist); breaking off what we are doing if interrupted by a text (I just caught myself doing that very thing so know how tempting it can be to assume what's coming in is more important than what you're doing right now!).
- more worry and anxiety through too much checking on our nearest and dearest – if we can't get hold of them, fretting that something may be wrong.
- possible sleep problems eventually for those who can't resist taking Blackberries, mobile phones or laptops to bed and consulting them last thing at night and then first thing in the morning.
- virtual contact gradually replacing real contact: losing the energy-giving stimulus of real time, real life conversations.

How addicted to being switched on are you?

Because being addicted to being switched on is a virtuous addiction, with so many potential benefits, it can be hard to recognise when it's gone too far, when rather than serving you it's pushing you further out of balance. The questionnaire below aims to help you assess how far you are controlling your connectivity or how far it is controlling you. Read the questions then tick the column that most closely matches your experience:

| | Often | Sometimes | Never/Rarely |
|--|-------|-----------|--------------|
| If no-one contacts you for a while, do you check your mobile phone to make sure it's working? | | | |
| When on holiday do you continue to text/tweet/check emails/Facebook etc while you're away? | | | |
| Do you text/email someone close by you could easily speak to? | | | |
| Do you spend hours of your leisure time at a mobile phone or computer screen? | | | |
| Do you check with family members where or how they are when they are out and about? | | | |
| Do you play with your mobile phone/ Blackberry etc when you have a spare moment? | | | |
| Do you stay up late to chat online, post on Facebook, check emails or any other online pursuits? | | | |
| Do you break off other tasks to read texts/ tweets/emails? | | | |
| Do you go online first thing in the morning? | | | |
| Are you online last thing at night? | | | |
| Total | | | |

Your results

Add up the ticks in each column, then compare the scores for each column. Very broadly, the higher your score in the Never/Rarely column, the better you are at controlling your connectivity. The higher your score in the 'Often' column, the more your connectivity is likely to be controlling you and probably exacerbating your Work Life imbalance. More specifically ...

- **Highest score in the 'Never/Rarely' column:** a score of 8-10 in this column and it is unlikely that this particular 'virtuous addiction' is affecting you adversely. A score of 6 or 7 and you are still likely to be largely in control of your connectivity. A score of 4 or 5 and you should look carefully at the questions where you answered 'Often' or 'Sometimes' to see where you still feel compelled to be connected. What issues do these 'Sometimes' or 'Often' responses raise for you? Can you identify any changes you could make to your habits that would help you switch off more readily?
- **Highest score in the 'Often' column:** The higher your score in this column, the more likely it is that being switched on is dominating your life without necessarily serving you. If you scored over 8 in this column, making changes that will reduce your need to be constantly connected will make a positive difference to your life. A score over 5 still indicates an urgent need to take back control of your connectivity, particularly if the next highest score was in the 'Sometimes' column.
- **Highest score in the 'Sometimes' column:** A high score in this column could mean that being connected is gradually taking over. But more slowly than if your highest score was in the 'Often' column. If your next highest score is 'Never/Rarely' the process is likely to be gradual and you should be able to take back control by following the tips below. If your next highest score is 'Often', however, the process is likely to be more advanced and you need to take your need to be connected in hand more urgently.

Ten Tips for Switching Off

Breaking free from an addiction to being switched on can remove one possible obstacle to making some of the beneficial changes you have already identified for improving your Work Life balance. Ways to break free and regain control of your connectivity include ...

- Recognise how strongly you feel pulled towards being continually connected. Start to notice when you feel you must go online. Identify

what draws you most – Facebook, emails, online chat - and aim to start there in regaining control.

- Cut down gradually. Only check emails twice a day, say, or have just one timed session on Facebook.
- Change other people's expectations of your availability. Get them used to your sometimes being offline or not responding readily to texts.
- Don't feel you always have to reply or post a comment. Or not straightaway at any rate. Assess what genuinely warrants your attention. Be selective.
- Physically switch off your mobile phone/computer. Go away from them and do something completely non-digital. Recognise the pull you may feel to get back online after you've been off for a while. Practise resisting. Prove to yourself that life is possible without being permanently connected.
- Have digital-free days when you and everyone in your household is offline (Read 'The Winter of our Disconnect' by Susan Maushart for one family's six month experiment in going offline).
- Move more, sit less.
- Keep your mobile phone and/or laptop out of the bedroom. If you have been using these devices when in bed, break the habit.
- Question how much you are keeping track of members of your family – allow them out of your orbit more often.
- Cultivate real as opposed to virtual relationships: what keeps you from talking to friends and colleagues direct?

And one more

Just because you can doesn't mean you have to – treat your mobile phone and computer as the useful tools they are. But remember who is in control. Just because you can go online, doesn't mean you have to.

Do Nothing for Two Minutes site

If your computer draws you irresistibly, visit this site, set up by Alex Tew, self-confessed addict to Facebook and Twitter, who says he set the site up as a bit of fun to see how widespread his kind of addiction was. You'll see a picture of the ocean and hear the sound of waves and you're asked to just sit and relax. A timer counts down from 2 minutes – if you touch your mouse or keyboard during your two minutes doing nothing, you fail and the timer resets. Try it at www.donothingfor2minutes.com.

Other additions

Once you start thinking about the need to connect as a 'virtuous addiction' you may start to notice other similarly virtuous addictions in yourself or other people. Here are some possibilities ...

- an addiction to Doing (we explored the common drive to be constantly occupied in Chapter 5)
- an addiction to achieving – a close relative to being addicted to Doing
- an addiction to work – giving rise to the term 'workaholic'

Can you add to the list? If you recognise yourself in any of these 'virtuous addictions' what effect is it having on your life? Your Work Life balance?

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 7: What are you Afraid of?

Fear is another major obstacle to change that we often don't recognise. We may well feel our lives are unbalanced and crave more choices and fewer chores, but when it comes to doing something about it, we hold back for fear of what might happen if we do things differently. It's as though we're walking a tightrope. We have our technique and it works. One small change could have us tumbling down to earth.

Not that we see it that way. Many of us are edging forward on our tightrope with little idea of the role fear is playing in our lives. This is because fears, like addictions, can take on a cunning variety of virtuous disguises.

Conscientiousness, for instance, perfectionism, being supremely well-organised, keeping on top of things, these are all positive qualities, excellent in moderation. But like virtuous addictions, they can take over if not kept in check.

People who are particularly prone to fear of what might happen if they do things differently are often those who feel a strong need for control. Their fear of letting go, of which they are largely unaware, can be seen as an umbrella fear under which may be sheltered all manner of subsidiary fears. 'If I let go, if I don't check and double check, oversee others, make sure they're doing things right, I might...what? Make a mistake, get things wrong, things might fall apart...I might disappoint the boss, fail, be a loser, displease a customer, a colleague, a friend, my mother...' If you are starting to recognise yourself here, can you add to the list?

Another way of always being switched on

In the last chapter we saw how constantly being connected, never switching off from our digital appliances can result in tension and contribute to our Work Life imbalance. The need for control, for hanging on, the fear of the consequences of letting go is another way of being constantly switched on, equally exhausting when taken to extremes.

A strong need for control with the accompanying fear of letting go will mean you find it hard to delegate because the other person may not do it right and will almost certainly not do it as well as you; you may find it hard to complete projects or reports wanting to check one last time just in case there are still mistakes. And you certainly can't leave your children to do their homework without your involvement. How can they possibly get it right if you haven't looked it over?

In her book 'Eat Pray Love' Elizabeth Gilbert gives a graphic description of what it means to fear letting go:

'Letting go, of course, is a scary enterprise for those of us who believe that the world revolves only because it has a handle on top of it which we personally turn, and that if we were to drop the handle for even a moment – well, that would be the end of the universe.' (Bloomsbury, P. 164)

If our hand is constantly on the handle of our personal world of work, family, friends, interests, travel and the like; if that world only revolves because we are hanging on vigilantly, if we believe it would otherwise fall apart, then we will eventually wear ourselves out. And yet we carry on, through fear of the consequences of letting others take over. Fear that if we are not there to supervise, everything will fall apart. And so we get even more exhausted...

A virtuous, or is it a vicious circle? Which is self perpetuating as others get used to us wanting to be involved in everything, or used to whatever they do being scrutinised or redone – and so they do less, you do more and get more exhausted. And resentful of others for not doing their share.

How good are you at letting go?

To test yourself: read the following statements. For each one think about how far it reflects your own view then give it a mark depending on how far you agree/disagree. 1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree.

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| It's usually quicker to do things myself than explain how to do them to others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| It's very important to me to get things right | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| When I try to help people sometimes complain that I am interfering | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I'm the one they all turn to when things go wrong | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I feel responsible for other people getting things right | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I am proud of being a perfectionist | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I often double check people have done what they say they have | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I carry a lot of responsibility on
my shoulders

1 2 3 4 5

Your results

Add up your score for each question to get a total score. The higher your total score, the harder you find it to let go. A score between 30 and 40 indicates your need to control whomever and whatever is in your orbit is very strong. You find it hard to let go though you may not be aware of it as you may see yourself as acting for the good of others. Between 20 and 30 your need for control is still strong though you may be beginning to see the benefits of letting go, starting to realise your world can operate without your hand permanently on the tiller. Between 15 and 20 suggests you like to be in control but can let go when you need to. Under 15 suggests control is not a big issue for you – you are good at letting go and allowing the world to function without your constant supervision.

Ten Tips for Letting Go

This kind of fear, fear of releasing control, loosening our grip on everyone and everything in our orbit is another obstacle to making the changes necessary to achieving a more comfortable Work Life balance. Tips for letting go include ...

- **Start small** – choose one opportunity to loosen your hold on everything around you, not asking a 'Did you do what I told you?' question, or not checking one last time. Assess the result. How did it feel? Were there any disastrous results?
- **Keep out** – choose a family or work project that doesn't strictly require your expertise: practise not getting involved at all.
- **Take their word for it** – practise trusting others. How does it feel to take their word and not go and see for yourself?
- **Ask permission to get involved** – this may be a new way of acting for you. You do have expertise that is valuable to others. Try asking if they'd like you to get involved.
- **Do your own thing** – but don't automatically expect it to be what others want to do. If the family just want to hang out while you think you should all be doing something more productive, consider letting them do their thing. If you want to do something different, that's fine – go ahead but leave them to their own devices.
- **Hand back responsibility** – if those around you are used to you taking everything on your shoulders, you might need to educate them to take more responsibility themselves. Experiment with handing back responsibility that you may (perhaps without realising) have taken on.

- **Respect others' timing** – you can't always judge how long things should take by how long you believe you would take. Listen to others and agree on a timescale rather than assuming everyone must accept your assessment.
- **You are not your children** – their homework is their homework not yours. Allow them to take responsibility for their own projects – even if they get lower marks than if you had done half of it.
- **Take their suggestions seriously** – be more prepared to listen to others' contributions rather than telling them how it will be.
- **Once again remember: Just because you can doesn't mean you have to** – you may well have the greatest expertise in all kinds of domains at work and at home, but that doesn't automatically mean you have to take over and control everything.

And finally - who are you trying to please?

People who find it hard to let go are many and varied. Some operate from a stance of self assurance – 'I am the capable one, the one who can keep things on track'. Though they may see their constant overseeing at home and at work as for the good of their staff/colleagues/family those on the receiving end don't always see it that way. The result may be conflict.

At the other end of the scale are those who operate from a lack of assurance, not confident of their abilities and therefore liable to check and double check and seek reassurance they are doing OK. Such people often explain their behaviour, perhaps with a touch of pride, by saying they are 'perfectionists' though this can be a shorthand for being very anxious, going over and over work to make sure it's correct, taking much longer than necessary to complete it.

People at this end of the scale are often afraid of displeasing or disappointing – they may or may not be sure who, but the hazy figure they are trying to please will often be an authority figure perhaps a boss or parent. This fear of displeasing or disappointing will have deep roots which may not be easy to unearth. But you can lessen the impact by starting to become aware of those fleeting feelings of being judged.

Next time your confidence plummets over a decision ('I'm not sure I made the right choice') or completing a project ('Don't know if it's good enough'), or a family problem ('I wonder if that was the right way to handle it'), instead of letting your 'perfectionism' take over (going over the reasons for your decisions,

doing even more work on the project) instead just observe your reactions. Use it as an opportunity to tune in more closely to what is going on ...

- Who is my audience? The voices in my head casting doubt? Who am I trying to please or worrying I may have disappointed?
- What if I do displease them. What am I afraid will happen?
- Where do I need to send these voices when I feel them judging me?

The idea is to gain greater awareness of the messages you are receiving from your 'critical figure' so you can see more easily that he/she is a part of you that you can learn to push aside and eventually (almost) disregard. It can be a slow process. But it's worthwhile if it means you gradually free yourself from needing to maintain such close control. You'll feel the benefit in better balance, more confidence and greater energy.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 8: The Tyranny of 'shoulds'

In Chapter 4 we introduced the idea of meta programmes, ways of sorting and organising our experience that become so automatic we don't notice. To illustrate we gave the example of Necessity-Possibility. Being driven by what we should or ought to be doing indicates, we suggested, a tendency towards a meta programme of necessity, whereas those who talk in terms of options and choices are more likely to have a meta programme of possibility.

For people whose meta programme is one of 'necessity' the 'shoulds' that govern their lives can be a further hefty obstacle in the way of change. Improving your Work Life balance generally requires some cutting back on obligations. But for every tentative step towards making space for yourself – at work by, say, sending one of your staff to a meeting instead of attending yourself, at home, perhaps by asking another parent to pick up your daughter from Brownies – comes a series of afterthoughts. 'I really should go to the meeting myself, it's not fair on Peter, he's not as up to speed as I am'...'I really should pick up the girls, Jane has so much on her plate, it's not fair to ask her to go out of her way...' And so on. Afterthoughts of guilt about burdening others overlaid with all kinds of reasons why putting yourself first is not right.

Virtuous 'shoulds'

As we've seen with 'virtuous addictions' and with fears taking on virtuous disguises, 'shoulds' too can appear to lead to virtue. If we do everything we 'should', taking the burden from others, then we place ourselves safely on the moral high ground, out of range of criticism, no cause for feeling guilty.

And, of course, there are many legitimate 'shoulds', ways of living we would do well to aspire to, from working to the best of our ability in our jobs to keeping our homes in order and helping others when we can. It's when 'I should' becomes an automatic response that 'shoulds' can become a problem. 'Poor Jane, she's feeling low. I should take on some of her work.' 'My boss has taken to coming in earlier. He might need me. I should start coming in earlier myself.' 'My sister is complaining her husband won't help her choose new curtains. I should go with her instead.'

Underlying this kind of 'should' is often an unconscious wish or need to please other people, or to impress them with your selflessness. But the more you want to please and/or impress others, the less you are aware of what you want for yourself.

Going along with others, second guessing what will please them is often a key factor in your Work Life getting out of balance in the first place. 'Shoulds' are an obstacle to getting back into balance because they stand in the way of making clear, well grounded decisions. Instead of making a firm decision to hand over a project you can't fit in then acting on your decision, people in thrall to 'shoulds' are likely to cloud the issue by this kind of inner conversation ...

I know I'm snowed under but that's no excuse - I should do it myself
Of course but I really haven't got the time
I should be able to fit it in. My time management is hopeless
I know but if I handed it over to Jane, it would be a load off my mind
But it's not really fair on her. I should be the one to do it
Jane's perfectly capable, isn't she - it would be good for her to get the experience
But it's my responsibility. I should accept my responsibilities instead of trying to offload them all the time ...

And so it goes on. Backwards and forwards. Do you ever have such inner conversations?

Should I or Shouldn't I?

Mostly our 'shoulds' are self-imposed though we may attribute them to others. The exercise below helps you explore some of your own 'should' scenarios. The idea is to bring out your way of handling 'shoulds' to see if you might tackle them more productively.

Think about some situations that are coming up where you feel you 'should' do something (events you feel you should attend, responsibilities you feel you should take on, favours you feel you should grant, changes to your working conditions you feel you should accept...). In the first column describe the scenario briefly – add any inner conversations you have been having. Then in the middle column, consider: 'Why I should'. List what's pushing you towards doing whatever it is. What are the internal pressures, the ones you bring to bear on yourself. Add in any external pressures from other people. Then in the third column consider: 'Why I should not' List reasons you feel you don't have to do whatever it is.

| 'Should' scenario Inner conversations | Why I should | Why I should not |
|--|--------------|------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

For 'Read Out loud Readers' The table has finished.

Reflecting on your results

For each scenario, review your results.

- First consider which is the longer list: 'Why I should' or 'Why I should not'.
- Now consider which is the most convincing list, which has the points that convince you most forcefully? Note whether you are more convinced by reasons that benefit you, or by reasons that favour others over yourself.
- Now consider what you actually will do in each case. Will you decide on the basis of whether the 'I should' or 'I should not' list is the most convincing?
- If you don't take the route of 'which list is more convincing?', why not? Is it because though you're convinced by reasons that benefit you, taking this route means saying no and possibly displeasing/disappointing someone else? Or because it feels selfish to do what's best for you even though the 'I should not' reasons are stronger? Or some other reason? Be very clear with yourself about the reasons for your decision for each scenario.

What have you learnt from this exercise about the way you typically handle 'shoulds'?

'Shoulds', choices and chores

In Chapter 3 we saw the way that Work Life imbalance can be seen as too many chores and too few choices. Suppose we look at 'shoulds' in terms of choices and chores. If what you think you 'should' do is also what you are convinced is the best and right thing to do, then your 'should' can be seen as a 'choice', what you have freely chosen to do, rather than a 'chore', what you feel you have to do whether you like it nor not. To improve your Work Life balance, it is important therefore to test your 'shoulds' to make sure they are well-grounded, that they really are the best and right course of action, that your 'shoulds' are choices not chores.

How to test your 'shoulds'

Let's take as an example a 'should' about fitness: 'I should go running every morning'. And two different scenarios illustrating how saying yes to a 'should' may be a choice or a chore.

Scenario 1

I should go running every morning

Who says so?

Me

Why should I?

I want to get more exercise

I've done it before – I know I enjoy it when I get going

I'll have more energy...

Why should I not?

I'll have to get up much earlier

I haven't got the right kit

I might get wet...

What do other people say?

My partner is encouraging me

He says he'll have a nice cup of tea waiting for me

He reminds me I'll feel good afterwards...

Scenario 2

I should go running every morning

Who says so?

Me

Why should I?

My friend wants me to – she's a good friend

It could do me good to get more exercise

I don't want to let her down

Why should I not?

I'll have to get up much earlier than I want to

I haven't got the right kit

I don't enjoy running that much

What do other people say?

My friend is encouraging me

She says I'll enjoy it

She doesn't like running on her own

In either case you could choose to run or not to run. In Scenario 1, if you say yes, your 'should' looks more like a choice, an activity you can see has strong benefits for you in spite of some reservations. In Scenario 2, if you say yes, you have the makings of what looks more like a chore, an activity requiring a lot of effort that you're doing because someone else wants you to.

Use this as a template for testing your own 'shoulds':

Should

Who says so?

Why should I?

Why should I not?

What do other people say?

'Shoulds' Summary Checklist

- Look out for 'shoulds'. Try to spot them before you commit yourself.
- Recognise you have a choice more often than you realise.
- Be clear why you are doing what you think you 'should'.
- Put others first by all means but be aware you're doing it and why.
- Test your 'shoulds' to assess whether they are choices or chores. Aim to reduce those that are chores and increase those that are choices.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 9: On Saying No – even to good things

The final obstacle to making the changes we know would help improve our well-being is saying yes when no would serve us better. As we saw in Chapter 8, to increase your choices and reduce what feel like chores, you sometimes need to say no to 'shoulds'. Often this means doing what's right for you rather than feeling you always have to please other people.

Sometimes too we need to say no simply because our life is too full. To improve our sense of balance we need to cut commitments rather than add more in. This can even extend to saying no to fun things, invitations we would gladly have accepted if life were not already full to the brim. For many of us, however, saying no is not easy – and so we say yes instead.

Know when and knowing how

Getting better at saying no raises two closely-related issues. The first revolves around knowing when it's best for you to say no. The exercises in Chapter 8 showed that the answer is not always obvious. The second is about knowing how to say no. Sometimes we say yes even when we'd rather say no because we're not sure how to refuse in a way that avoids unpleasant consequences.

Knowing when to say no

Knowing when it's best to say no means developing a clear sense of your own interests. Many of us have an unspoken belief, however, that taking too much account of our own interests is selfish. A first step for us therefore will be to reframe that belief into something more like: 'Doing what's best for me is sensible not selfish. To take care of others I need first to take care of myself'.

In this new frame of mind, when asked to take on anything new it needs to become second nature to ask yourself three questions ...

- Can I safely say yes?
- Do I need to negotiate some part of this request? (for example, the timing – 'I can safely say yes for Wednesday so long as we're finished by 4 pm')
- Would it serve me better to say no?

And if this still sounds selfish, consider the alternative: taking on something that may not serve you, something that could become a burden and further push you out of balance.

Enough is enough questionnaire

To test how good you are at knowing when to say no, try the following questionnaire. For each question, tick the column that is closest to your experience:

| | Often | Sometimes | Never/Rarely |
|--|-------|-----------|--------------|
| Do you say yes when asked to do something without even considering that you could say no? | | | |
| Do you agree to squeeze in extra commitments even when your diary is already full? | | | |
| Do you say yes and regret it later? | | | |
| Do others appear to assume you'll say yes, hardly giving you the chance to say no? | | | |
| Do you say yes to requests for volunteers to help with something even if you're super busy yourself? | | | |
| Do you juggle your life to accommodate as many people and their demands as possible? | | | |
| Do you say yes because you feel you should rather than because you want to? | | | |
| Do you say yes so as not to disappoint other people? | | | |
| Do certain people get you to say yes against your better judgement? | | | |
| Do you feel guilty if you say no? | | | |
| Total | | | |

Your results

Add up the ticks in each column, then compare the scores for each column. The higher your score in the 'Often' column, the more likely you are to be saying yes more often than is good for you. More specifically ...

- **Highest score in the 'Never/Rarely' column:** a score of 8-10 in this column and it is likely you know when enough is enough. A score of 6 or 7 and you are still reasonably good at knowing when to say no, especially if your next highest score is in the 'Sometimes' column. A score of 4 or 5 and you should take a close look at your 'Often' and 'Sometimes' responses to help you identify issues you may have with saying no.
- **Highest score in the 'Often' column:** If you scored over 8 in this column, making changes that will result in a slimmed down diary will allow you space to regain a better sense of balance. To do this means saying no more, possibly much more, often. Use the tips below to help with ways of saying no. A score over 5 still indicates a need to scale back and recognise when enough is enough. Particularly if your next highest score was in the 'Sometimes' column.
- **Highest score in the 'Sometimes' column:** A high score in this column could mean that you find it hard but still possible to know when it's best to say no. Use the tips below to push some of your 'Sometimes' habits into the Never/Rarely column.

Knowing how to say no

Knowing when to say no and how to say no are interlinked. If you're indecisive about whether it's best to say no, when you do you're likely to sound half-hearted and open to be persuaded to say yes instead. To say no firmly and convincingly, first priority is to be sure in yourself that no is the best answer and the one you want to give.

Tips on how to say no

The following tips will help you say no effectively ...

- Start by becoming convinced yourself – ask the three questions listed above. If your conclusion is that no is the right answer, take this as giving yourself permission to say no.
- Don't give a long lead up to saying no or assume it must be obvious you mean no without your having to say it. Instead:

- Say no simply and clearly so you cannot be misunderstood. Useful phrases include ...
 - 'That doesn't work for me'
 - 'I can't do x, but what I can do is y'
 - 'I'd love to but I can't take anything else on at the moment'
 - 'I'm sorry but it has to be no'
 - 'I'm afraid I can't help you this time ...'
- Do not make excuses ('I would say yes but unfortunately I have to give Roger a lift that day') or give unnecessary information – the less you say about why you can't say yes the less ammunition you provide for being persuaded to change your mind.
- Be aware of ways people might work on you to persuade you to reconsider (e.g. acting surprised even hurt that you have refused; trying to make you feel guilty by saying they were counting on you; trying to bully you or challenge you strongly...). Which ones are you most susceptible to?
- If people use any of these (or other) tactics, don't engage – instead be prepared to repeat your no (repeating one or more of the useful phrases above). You might add something like: 'I appreciate you have a problem, but doing x doesn't work for me....'
- If people try to hand their problem over to you as though if you say no it's up to you to find someone who'll say yes, don't accept it. Hand the problem back. Repeat the phrase above: 'I appreciate you have a problem but I'm afraid I can't help you this time. Who else could help you?'
- Keep your tone as neutral as you can. Try not to sound apologetic.
- Keep repeating your no until the other person accepts it.
- Congratulate yourself on succeeding and use the experience to help you next time.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from what we've done so far, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 10: Time to Experiment

If you've worked through Chapters 1 to 9 you will already have a good deal of insight into what's pushing you out of balance. You will also have plenty of ideas for improving your Work Life balance, some of which you'll already have tried. Now it's time to stand back and consolidate what you've learnt.

What's the key learning for you?

Most of us don't change our lives by working out the pros and cons of various courses of action then choosing one of them. Change is usually a much messier, backwards and forwards kind of a process. One thing that does often stand out, however, is the moment when something strikes us about the way we have been living, or about our beliefs or assumptions that we simply hadn't realised. 'Oooh, so that's what I've been doing?' An ah-ha moment.

To give a personal example. Some years ago I was coached by a perceptive American coach and one of my issues was that I just didn't have enough space in my life. One day she said to me: 'You work for yourself. You're free to organise your life as you want, to work as much or as little as you like. And yet you talk and act as though you have a 9 to 5 job.'

That was an ah-ha moment. I simply hadn't realised how much I was constraining myself; hadn't seen that I had the possibility of freedom I wasn't allowing myself to enjoy. And though I've forgotten much of what else I discussed with my US coach all those years ago, I've never forgotten that insight into the way my own mindset was contributing to the lack of space and freedom I was complaining about.

Another insight that came during a turbulent time of my life was the realisation that I talk about my feelings but don't really feel them. This can happen, I realised, to people like me who operate a lot from their heads. We think we are comfortable with our feelings because we can talk about them, but this talk is a way of keeping them at a distance. And if we can keep them at a distance then they are under control and we won't be overwhelmed by them. This is another insight I've never forgotten.

Both these insights opened up new ways of acting and feeling for me - I enjoy the benefits to this day. But they were my insights. Revelations to me because

of the person I was and the way I was living. A revelation to one person may be perfectly obvious or not even relevant to another. As we said at the start, Work Life balance is an individual matter.

So think now about your own key learning from working with this Useful Guide – it may be something not in the Useful Guide itself, something you realised because you were more prepared to go inwards and visit your inner self, more prepared to survey your habits, beliefs and assumptions. Use the space below to write down your ah-ha moment, anything you realise now you didn't fully realise before, the one insight you will act on even if you don't do anything else. The one you won't forget.

What I realise now that I didn't realise before (when printed)

Trying things out

As we begin to see which of our habits may be contributing to our Work Life imbalance, we start looking for different behaviours we hope will help instead of hindering. At this stage we need to be prepared to experiment, try out new ways of living - staying offline at weekends, for instance, or taking up Pilates, or saying no more forcefully. Because Work Life balance is an individual matter, what we choose to try will be different for each of us. We could call it our pilot project.

Use the space below to note what you are trying out, how you are experimenting with changing the way you live. What effects you notice. How you are assessing whether the new habits are helpful. Any changes you may make to your experiment based on what you find:

How I am experimenting

Effects I notice

My assessment

And if at first you don't succeed – maybe Pilates doesn't suit you or saying no is harder than you think – then try, try again, as the adage goes. Devise a different experiment. It's your life to play with, after all. And the key for many of us is to rediscover how to play.

Extra tools

Finally some extra tools you may find helpful. The first I discovered a few years ago when I attended a coaching workshop run by US coach Michael Neill (www.supercoach.com; sign up for his excellent Weekly Tip). This is how I remember it. We did an exercise that required us to make a list of 10 things that make us feel good. They could be as small as stroking our cat – activities we could easily include in our daily lives.

We created a chart listing our 10 feel-good activities and the days of the week: something like this:

| What makes me feel good | Mon | Tues | Wed | Thurs | Fri | Weekend |
|-------------------------|-----|------|-----|-------|-----|---------|
| Stroking my cat | | | | | | |
| Listening to x music | | | | | | |
| Going for a walk | | | | | | |
| etc | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

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The aim was then to include activities from our feel-good list in our lives every single day thereby improving our well-being. Making our list was a necessary first step as many of us get stressed precisely because we have lost sight of what relaxes us and helps us feel good. In our addiction to Doing we either disregard these small treats or 'don't have time' to fit them in. The idea of the chart was so we could tick off the feel-good activities we'd made time for each day.

This chart was a tool Michael Neill used with coaching clients and he told us a story about one of them. It went something like this, or rather this is how I remember it: 'I have a coaching client I gave this homework to - a very capable woman with a high powered job. She made her chart with her ten things that make her feel good and started to use it. One day she said to me 'As you know I'm a complex person with a demanding life we could spend a lot of time analysing. But actually, what I find is that if I do some of my ten things, I have a good day. And if I don't, I have a bad day.'

It could be that simple. If you nurture yourself in small ways each day you will be OK. If you don't, you won't.

Why not try using your own version of the tool. Make your list and start feeling good in small ways on a daily basis.

Meditation

As we've seen throughout this Useful Guide, understanding and acting to improve your Work Life balance requires you to go inside, to become aware of habits, beliefs, assumptions you didn't know were driving you. We've also seen the value of taking time out, learning to refresh ourselves by switching off.

One way of both going inside and switching off is through meditation which, as we saw earlier, doesn't have to be esoteric. Find a quiet spot (in a bustling household, it may be best to wait till you have the house to yourself), sit comfortably (better to use an upright chair than an armchair to help you keep your back straight), hands in your lap or on your knees, close or defocus your eyes, take a few deep breaths then settle in, noticing but not taking notice of any sounds around you. Scan your body noting any tension you find. Slowly sink into yourself, just settle, be there, there's nothing to do but observe your breathing, in and out, letting your mind be free. Stay for five minutes to start

with then extend to ten, fifteen, twenty. It's up to you. Come back slowly, tuning back in to the sounds and feel of the world around you. Gently open your eyes.

For more detailed instructions try Headspace (www.getsomeheadspace.com).

Legs up the wall

The ultimate quick relaxer from the world of yoga. If you're weary and need a boost, find a free stretch of wall and lie down, buttocks against the skirting board, legs stretched straight up the wall, arms either by your sides, or on your abdomen. Ten minutes and you'll feel great. Fifteen or twenty and you'll be amazed at how refreshed you'll feel.

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from all we've done, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Chapter 11: Pulling it all Together

Right at the start of this Useful Guide we suggested that the term 'Work Life balance' is really a useful shorthand for having too much of some things, often to do with your paid work, and too little of others, often including family and friends and taking time to enjoy the lighter side of life. We explored looking at Work Life balance in terms of chores and choices to see how far freedom was a factor, to see whether activities we choose weigh less heavily than those where we feel we have little option. We also saw that having a good Work Life balance means living in a way that gives space to all the different aspects of your life from your paid work through your home life and the people you care about to all the other activities that give your life meaning. You'll be aware too from all the exploration you've done that improving your Work Life balance is really about increasing your well-being. The stronger and more grounded you are, the more use you are to others.

Where are you now?

Time now to take stock and review where you are now compared to when you started this process of discovering your habits, attitudes and choices and how they affect your sense of being in balance. In Chapter 1 we considered a 'Work Life balance' scale like the one below, a scale for assessing, impressionistically, where you were between 1 (totally unbalanced – life all over the place) and 10 (nicely balanced, good feeling of well-being).

1 _____ 10
Totally unbalanced Nicely balanced

You marked yourself on the scale to see where you were starting from. If you were, say, 4 at the start, you saw you were already on the journey to better balance.

Now you've worked through the Useful Guide it's time to mark yourself on the scale again. Where are you now? As before, don't think too hard, go for the number that comes straight to mind. How does it compare with the first figure?

Much higher?

Great news! How did you get there? What's changed for you to make such an impact? What bold choices did you make? It's important to remember what

made the difference. As we have seen, change is a messy, backwards and forwards process, and if you were to slip back a little in the future, you need to be clear how to push forward again. The tips below will help you maintain momentum.

A little higher?

Great news too! Change is often a slow process. Even moving 1 or 2 points up the scale can make a huge difference to your well-being. How did you get where you are now? What was your main impetus for change?

The same?

That's OK. So long as you've gained some awareness of what's going on for you. The gap between knowing what can help and taking action can stretch wide. Who can help you nudge yourself into making the beneficial changes you now know would improve your well-being? What is your next step towards better balance?

Lower?

Let's hope not! But if you are, be very clear with yourself what's getting worse and why. What will give you the courage to reclaim your life? Go back over everything you've realised about the way you are living. What's keeping you stuck? ...

- Beliefs?
- Shoulds?
- Pressure?
- Obligations?
- Fear?

Never forget that you can make choices. Even in situations that seem impossible, something can shift if you choose to change just one tiny element. What will you choose?

Tips for maintaining momentum

I originally called these 'Tips for maintaining balance' until I realised that this would imply that 'balance' was a once and for all state. As we saw right at the start, however, achieving balance is not so much a state as an ongoing process where you find yourself needing to adjust to more of this and less of that as you feel the movement of the different sides of your life in relation to each other.

Instead then these are tips to help you keep that ongoing process of achieving balance ongoing ...

- Talk to yourself – out loud or in your head. Be explicit about what's happening. Remind yourself which techniques for getting into balance work for you, and which ones don't.
- Keep up your awareness – keep in mind what you've learnt about yourself and your beliefs and behaviour. When life hots up it's easy to wander off your new path, to lose awareness and slip back into old unhelpful ways.
- Recognise signs of slipping back – pull back before you slide too far towards the unbalanced end of the Work Life balance scale.
- Revisit this Useful Guide for inspiration – repeat the exercises you've found most helpful.
- Get others involved – your well-being affects all those around you just as their well-being affects you. Get support from those who care about you. Support them as they find their own ways to better balance.
- Take time out to play regularly. Waste time! Revel in just being alive. Savour what's good.
- Laugh a lot. Get used to appreciating the lighter side of life.
- Keep remembering that you have a choice – much more often than you realise.
- Find places, real and virtual, to put helpful reminders, quotes, tips to inspire you.
- Get used to feeling good! Enjoy!

My notes from this chapter (when printed)

A space here for you to note what you particularly want to remember from all we've done, plus any ideas of your own you want to capture.

Resources

Books, websites etc quoted in the Useful Guide

www.solutionsurfers.com – brief coaching/the Miracle Question

'Teach Us To Sit Still: A sceptic's search for health and healing' by Tim Parks, Harvill Secker, 2010

'The Winter of our Disconnect' by Susan Maushart, Profile, 2011

www.donothingfortwominutes.com – on addiction to being connected

'Eat Pray Love' by Elizabeth Gilbert, Bloomsbury paperback, 2007

www.supercoach.com – Michael Neill – sign up for his Weekly Tip

www.getsomeheadspace.com – on meditation

Other useful resources

'The NLP Coach' by Ian McDermott and Wendy Jago, Piatkus, 2001

'The Art of Effortless Living' by Ingrid Bacci, Bantam Books edition, 2002

'Presence' by Patsy Rodenburg, Michael Joseph, 2007

'The Enneagram Made Easy' by Rene Baron and Elizabeth Wagele, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994

'Taming your Gremlin', Richard D. Carson, 1990

My newsletter

Visit www.chriscoach.com for a complete archive of my personal growth e-newsletter, Present Perfect: a blend of inspiration and practical advice. Sign up to receive it regularly.

Feedback

As we are always trying to improve our Useful Guides we would appreciate any feedback you can give us on **A Useful Guide to Work Life Balance**. Please click on the link below to access our online feedback form ...

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If we use your feedback to improve **A Useful Guide to Work Life Balance** we will email you a copy of the updated version.

About the Author



Chris Carling is a communication expert, mediator and ICF Professional Certified Coach, with over 2500 hours coaching experience. A former Director of Communications of the International Coach Federation (UK), Chris has worked as a coach and/or facilitator with a wide range of individuals and organisations in sectors including finance, theatre,

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Before becoming a coach she ran her own consultancy as a management training specialist and writer/developer of training materials. She is a script-writer of award winning training films, co-author of two books on communication and developer of a pack for trainers aimed at nurturing creativity in the commercial world (Creativity for Competitive Advantage, Fenman). She has an MA and PhD from the Exeter University and an MPhil in Linguistics from Cambridge University. Chris is also the author of [A Useful Guide to Overcoming Anxiety](#).

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