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Balance is a Four-Letter Word

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Thomas Merton once said, “Happiness is not a matter of intensity, but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony.” So often in the hustle and bustle of life, we lose sight of our happiness in favor of intensity; the intensity of our schedules, the demands placed upon us, our expectations of ourselves, and our constant drive towards our ambitions. Never has this been truer for me as it is right now, in the very throes of my last semester of graduate school.

I am admittedly a perfectionist when it comes to scholarly endeavors. While my car may carry an embarrassing amount of half-drunk water bottles and my laundry basket is overflowing, I take some serious pride in my academic work. Even more alarming, my dinners have become items purchased out of a vending machine and I haven’t been to yoga in over a month. Let’s not start with the guilt of missing out on time with my husband, stepson, family, and friends. My life has become increasingly unbalanced to heavily favor my academic pursuits, with little left in the tank for what feeds my soul or makes me happy.

Balancing academics, field work, a career, family, and LIFE is so much more challenging as a returning adult student than it was in my undergraduate studies. At that time I was single, worked very part-time, and was able to fully embrace the scholarly lifestyle. I now have a job and a family who have to compete with the time I spend in field and in class. I feel exhausted a good share of the time and I am living an incredibly unbalanced lifestyle. If I had any advice to give to those just starting there graduate studies it would be this: find your balance.

Now that graduation is in sight, I am reflecting back on my graduate experience. I am left wondering how the experience would have differed if I had spent more time balancing my life. Would I have enjoyed reading more articles if I had taken the time to attend a yoga class (or take a nap, or both) instead of seeing how much work I could pump out during my allotted study time? Should graduate programs focus more on quality over quantity, assigning less in favor of more quality discussions and work? I am not sure what are the right answers. I’ve been lucky to have professors who are in touch

with us, as students, and who have been accommodating while still holding us to a high standard. Yet I know, with no uncertainty, that many of my fellow graduate students have struggled in the way I have. So the following is what I propose in order for social work students to achieve balance.

1. **Schedule time for studying every day.** Do not go over your allotted time. A smaller amount of time everyday is more efficient than cramming everything into Sunday night.
2. **Schedule time for family.** Put the computer and books away. Eat dinner with your family. Watch a TV show together. Take your dog for a walk. Be with the people you love, even if it's only for 30 minutes. They will feel appreciated and it will put a smile on your face.
3. **Schedule time for your friends.** Even if it's a quick cup of coffee once a month, one hour with a kindred spirit will do more for your soul than that espresso ever will. Yes, I'm serious. Trust me!
4. **Be present.** When you are at your job, be at your job. When you are at class, be engaged. When at your field placement, soak in all the moments you can. Worrying about one responsibility while in the middle of another does not do anyone any favors, especially you.
5. **Feed your soul.** Find time once a week to engage in something that nourishes your soul. Whether it's yoga, meditation, retail therapy, exercise, reality TV, or a good book – feeding your soul is essential. It's your life force.
6. **Nourish your body.** No more vending machine dinners or coffee from a gas station. Packing healthy food will fuel your body through that lengthy lecture without the crash on the drive home.
7. **If none of these rules work for you, throw them out.** You are the expert in your own life. Finding balance is unique for all of us. Find your own rhythm and you will feel balanced.

I've spent the last week implementing my seven rules and I must say I'm feeling a little lighter, more balanced, and more myself than I have in months. I have a hunch that my rules may fly out the window at times during this last semester, but they are there as a reminder to resume my balance.

We spend an immeasurable amount of time encouraging others to care for themselves. It is essential that you give yourself that same advice. Be kind to yourself so you can be kind to others. Find balance so you can help others find theirs. Own your happiness so that others might find their light. Balance is a four-letter word: self, as in, SELF-care, SELF-love, and SELF-direction. While it may feel selfish, I assure you, it's not. Balance begins and ends with you. Heed the advice you would give to others, find joy in your day-to-day life, and honor your very SELF. Only then will you find your balance.