



De-bunking the Myth of Work-Life Balance: How to Integrate Instead?

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INTRODUCTION

Why is it hard to keep work and other areas of life aligned, so that a person is happy and feels complete? We hear a lot about the need to balance all aspects of our lives. But what is balance? Merriam Webster defines balance as a state of adjustment “between contrasting, opposing or interacting elements”¹. Within that definition we can begin to understand the impossibility of this task; balance requires us to make continual tradeoffs to maintain homeostasis.

The term ‘work-life balance’ became popularized in 1986, although the concept of work-life balance originated in programs founded in the 1930’s². The idea behind work-life balance began as a way to accommodate women in the workforce and quickly morphed into a benefit desired by all professional workers when the “idea that people would want to have balance between their professional and personal lives, more flexibility in managing their schedule, and presumptively increase satisfaction from work and life became a key concept in the late 20th century”³.

Balance requires us to segregate our lives into distinct areas, constantly having to give to one area and take from another. Balance is exhausting and unsustainable. A far better alternative is to look for ways to integrate the different parts of our lives, to create ‘whole life integration’. When we integrate, we literally seek to “form, coordinate, or blend into a functioning or unified whole : UNITE”⁴.

There are two main factors that impact our success in integrating the different areas of our lives: self-management and environmental factors. In order to achieve ‘whole-life integration’, we must focus on self-management components as well as environmental management of competing factors.

Self-Management

Know Yourself

The first place to start in achieving whole life integration is to understand what is important to you. What is your driving motivation, the very essence of why you do what you do? What are the core values that help to shape and support your driving motivation? The author suggests viewing Simon Sinek’s Ted X talk⁵ to understand the process of “finding your why”. Great core values exercises can be found online^{6,7}.

What Matters Most?

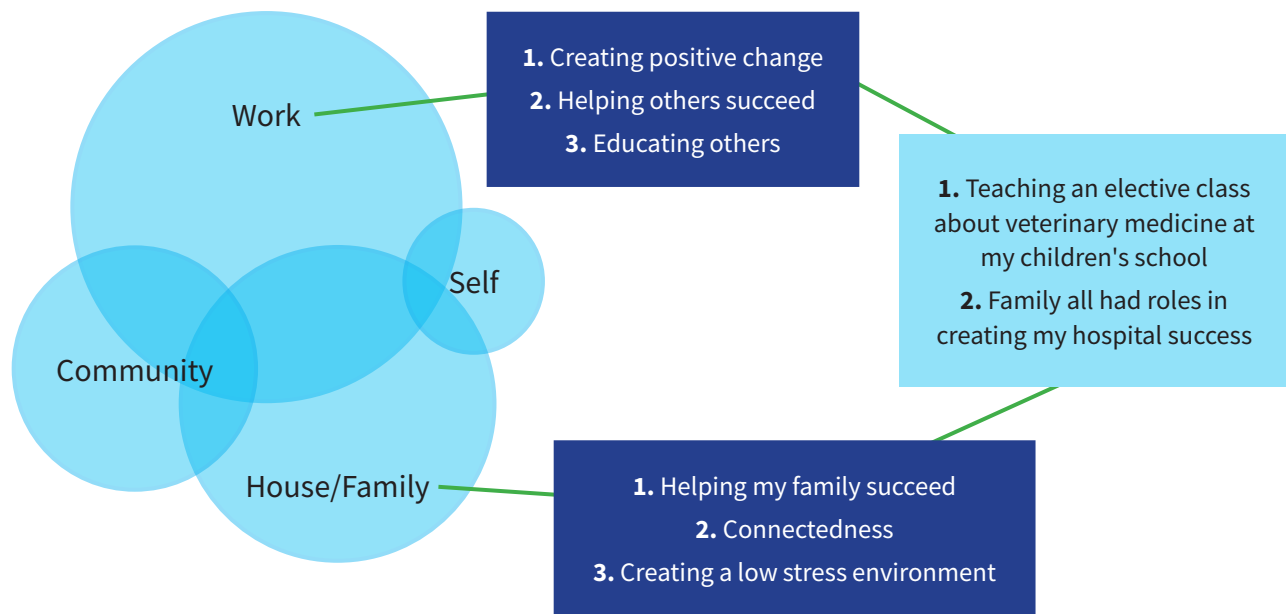
With so many competing interests for your time, how do you even know what is important to integrate? In a Harvard Business Review Article⁸, author Stewart Friedman explores integration by examining an individual’s four domains of life: “work, home/family, community (friends, neighbors, religious or social groups) and self (mind, body, spirit)”. He describes an exercise called four circles⁹, where four circles are drawn to represent each of the four domains in life. The size of the circles varies to represent the value that you feel for each of the areas. This

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should not be confused with where you spend the most time and effort, although there might be some similarities.

The circles are then arranged to represent the degree that overlap, or integration, occurs. Think about what defines each of these areas; what is important to you? How do your values and goals fit into these domains? List three examples for each of the four areas.

The final step in the exercise is to imagine how the overlapping areas could be increased. For one of each of your examples, list a way that you could help them integrate with another part of your life. For example, could you involve work and community by gathering together with friends to participate in an activity, like a benefit fund raiser for a pet cause. Below is an example of this process for two of the four domains represented:



What Stresses You?

A recent article¹⁰ published in JAVMA examined veterinary practice-related stressors that are significant factors in contributing to the lack of well-being in the veterinary profession. This study identified the most problematic stressors as “financial insecurity, client issues, coworker or interpersonal issues and work-life balance”.

Stress is often a by-product of not feeling in control of a situation or outcome. While we often look externally to develop strategies to address these concerns, we are missing an opportunity to create meaningful change: learning how to manage and adapt the stress we feel into a tool that helps create positive outcomes.

Before you can deal with stress, you need to know what’s causing it. As simple as it may sound, it can be helpful to make a list of the sources of your stress. Adapted from work by

Shawn Achor¹¹, the following exercise will help you reframe stress in your life and give you a sense of control:

- Make a list of stressors for each of the four domains of your life: work, family/home, community, self.
- For each domain, make two circles. In one circle, list the things you can control/change. In the second circle, list the things you can’t control/change.
- Ignore the second circle. Choose one item from the first circle for each domain and identify a single action step that you can implement to make a positive change.

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The first step in learning how to constructively channel stress is to be aware of how you respond to stress. As discussed in an article by Fox¹², begin by creating a mechanism to help you recognize your inner dialog, what you are feeling. Once daily, practice at least one of these techniques:

- Pause a moment and asking yourself “What am I thinking? What physical sensations do I feel?”
- Take a moment to listen closely to your thoughts. The author recommends to “detach from having the thoughts and feelings and label them”. For example, if you are feeling unhappy with a co-worker that was short with you, label the thought ‘irritated’ and the feeling ‘hurt’.
- Assess what you are feeling from a third-party point of view: “What do you notice about me right now?” and record those findings. Some observations might be: “You are excited about performing a new surgery” or “You are worried about interacting with the next client because she can be rude and aggressive”.

By learning to hear your inner dialog in low stress moments, you will begin to understand how manage that dialog in high stress moments. This skill set will help you to have better control over how you respond and result in lower stress levels and better outcomes.

Procrastination

Another way that we compound our daily stress is through procrastination. According to researcher Tim Pynchyl, who has spent more than 20 years studying why we procrastinate, procrastination is not a time-management problem,

but an emotion management problem. When we procrastinate, we get relief from facing an unpleasant task now. This is a self-defeating coping mechanism, because only your current self benefits, at the cost of your future self.

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Negative emotions associated with procrastination are guilt and shame. This sub-optimal motivation state¹⁴, the Imposed View, is the least healthy of all and has been associated with negative health outcomes like heart disease and hypertension.

The key to minimizing this costly and stress-inducing behavior is by developing our emotional regulation skills, which include “awareness, understanding, acceptance/tolerance, coping ability, and the ability to modify emotional experience.”¹³ The key to defeating procrastination requires that we work to understand ourselves better. By learning how to harness emotional regulation skills, we can turn these into tools to help us overcome procrastination.

One exercise to help overcome the inertia that accompanies procrastination is to set ‘implementation intentions’. As Pynchyl¹³ explains, implementation intentions help establish environmental

cues by creating a ‘when, then’ scenario. These cues help prompt us to take a desired action. For example, I believe in the value of great oral health for my Labrador, Oliver. I leave his toothbrush on the side of my sink as an environmental cue to brush his teeth every morning, after brushing my own teeth. This is a great example of “when I brush my teeth, I see Oliver’s toothbrush and then I brush his teeth.”

By using implementation intentions, we create a mechanism that helps us to start on whatever task we are putting off. Once we have a little momentum, keep it going by asking “what’s next”. This exercise is a natural extension of the first exercise as it helps to break up tasks over which procrastination is taking place into smaller, easily achieved goals. These proceedings are a perfect example. I enjoy the process of writing; however, it takes a lot of time and research to produce articles that are helpful to colleagues. By setting a goal to write at least 30 minutes a day, the process is painless, and I feel better about my progress and am on track to beat the submission deadline. Rather than stressing about how I am going to ‘find’ time to complete this task, I have created a framework that my ‘current self’ finds acceptable, and I avoid placing stress on my ‘future self’. According to Psychl¹³, “social psychologists have shown that even a little progress fuels our well-being and creates an upward spiral of well-being and motivation in our lives”.

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Environmental Management

Whole-life integration means understanding how one part of your life affects and influences the other areas of your life. As mentioned above, two of the significant stressors contributing to a lack of well-being in the veterinary profession were identified as client issues and coworker/interpersonal conflict¹⁰. When we are stressed and unhappy, these emotions tend to spill over into our other life domains, negatively impacting our satisfaction with our lives.

Coworker/interpersonal issues were defined by study participants as “lack of support, dysfunctional and hostile work environments, abusive or bullying coworkers and unethical practices.” Specifically identified sub-categories relating to client issues include “client’s complaints, clients unwilling or unable to pay, unrealistic expectations for treatment, lack of compliance or responsibility for pet and expectations of availability.”¹⁰

The authors observe that the most easily managed stressors in the study include those that can be environmentally addressed, such as client issues and coworker/interpersonal conflicts. How does the hospital leadership team start to tackle workplace challenges, specifically the two significant stressors noted above?

Psychological Safety

Creating a work environment that feels safe to your animal health care team is the first step in creating a positive

culture. When veterinary team members are immersed in a positive workplace culture, satisfaction with this life domain positively impacts the other domains of family/home, community and self.

Psychological Safety refers to the “shared belief by team members that the group is safe for inter-personal risk-taking.”¹⁵ In workplaces that create psychologically safe spaces, employees can learn, thrive and contribute. As discussed in the article Psychological Safety: a meta-analytic review and extension¹⁶, Psychological Safety has a direct positive influence on task performance by lessening the potential negative consequences of making a mistake, which increases creativity and initiative. “In terms of attitudinal outcomes, when employees feel safe in their workplace, they are more likely to want to continue in their current jobs, with their current co-workers.”

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Veterinary teams are focused on accomplishing tasks, often many at one time. Proactive conversations about how our team members interact with one another are often overlooked and behaviors develop indirectly. “When divergent expectations are not explicitly discussed, we risk rupturing relationships. Unmet expectations and undeclared

assumptions can cause the effectiveness of groups to unravel, resulting in irritation, distress and corrode transparency, trust and safety.”¹⁵

Psychological safety can be consciously fostered in our veterinary hospitals by creating an environment that encourages guidelines that help direct the way the group works together. These guidelines direct all relationship-based activities and are actively discussed and reinforced. One example of guidelines developed for the human nursing community is the CENTRE model¹⁵, useful during group meetings and morning huddles.

The acronym stands for:

C - Confidentiality: What is said in the group stays in the group.

E - Equal air time: Everyone has the right to participate in the conversation and contribute to the final product/decision.

N - Non-Judgmental, respectful listening: Team members don’t interrupt and seek to understand each other before being understood.

T - Timeliness: Respectful of others’ time and schedules.

R - Right to pass: Acknowledgement that the person in the group might not have anything new to contribute to the conversation or might need more time to think.

E - Engagement: Being fully present for the group, and the conversation.

Client Economic Limitations

Current research¹⁷ has uncovered high levels of professional burnout in veterinary teams, with 91% of respondents reporting the perception of burnout among their

peers as moderate to substantial. 49% disclosed that they were moderately to substantially affected. The primary driver of professional burnout was identified as client economic limitations.

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A recent publication¹⁸ explored the role of 'moral distress', defined as an emotional conflict between what is being requested of the individual and that persons deeply held personal standards, or morals, in veterinary professional burnout. This internal struggle often produces "painful feelings, psychological disequilibrium, or both resulting from barriers to performing actions consistent with one's own moral compass". In this study, "73% of respondents stated that not being able to do the right thing for a patient caused their staff moderate to severe stress and 78% replied that it caused them moderate to severe distress". Client financial limitations, with the attendant inability to provide desired care for veterinary patients, is a primary causative factor in moral distress.

Coe's 2007¹⁹ study evaluated the outcomes of focus groups of clients and of veterinarians regarding each group's perceptions of the cost of veterinary care. He found that clients had concerns about the lack of discussion regarding the cost of care, preferring these conversations to occur early in the course of an office visit. At the same time, clients also expressed that they expected pet care to be the

primary focus, with the cost of care a secondary consideration. Veterinarians expressed frustration in trying to meet these two disparate requests, while battling their personal unease that in monetizing pet care, some clients might choose less than optimal treatment with negative consequences.

In Coe's studies, it was found that pet owners wanted a proactive discussion about anticipated health costs. Experienced pet owners understood the costs associated with preventive care but wanted to be informed about new costs. New pet owners preferred transparent conversations regarding the cost of all services.

One simple solution is to educate clients early about the costs of pet ownership, beginning with the first visit. Explain the general course of pet owner expenses by life stage, with pets less than one and greater than six requiring more frequent visits and services, therefore requiring more financial resources. Conversely, young adult to adult pets typically use fewer financial resources, barring unforeseen injuries. By 'signposting', your clients can see what lies ahead and can plan for future expenses. Signposting can be reinforced at the end of each visit by summarizing what the pet will need in the next year of its life, and when the next examination should be scheduled.

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Conclusion

Imagine how satisfying life will be when you learn to 'integrate', uniting your four domains of life into a functioning or unified whole. When you have given yourself permission to be true to what matters the most to you, and have learned how to manage stress and procrastination, what will the impact be upon those who share these domains with you?

Consider how your teammates will benefit from psychologically safe workspaces. What will the outcomes be when clients understand how to best meet financial obligations to provide for their beloved pets? Whole life integration is possible and within your reach-what are you waiting for?

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