

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

**Balancing Strategies**

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**D**ecember is a particularly busy month in my life. There are always numerous work deadlines to meet prior to the end of the year. My family celebrates winter holidays that require gift-giving. (I am the chief gift-purchaser in my family.) There are additional holiday parties for work and my children's schools. The SGIM deadline for submission of abstracts, vignettes, and innovations rapidly approaches. All in all, December feels hectic every year, no matter how much I try to plan ahead.

I have found that when I am especially busy, life can become a juggling act rather than a balancing act. To distinguish between juggling and balancing, juggling occurs when I have more things to do than I can really accomplish. When I am in balance, I meet reasonable expectations in the various spheres of life: home, work, community service, recreation, and friends. I found a book a few years ago that expresses these concepts, and I recommend it as a useful read.<sup>1</sup> The authors of this book provide various categories of strategies to avoid juggling, and some of these have special relevance to those of us trying to achieve a balanced life in academic medicine.

One strategy to stay in balance is "alternating." Alternating as a balance strategy means that you alternate periods of greater work activity with periods of lesser activity, thus allowing more time for the home and self-care spheres during the periods of lesser work activity. Two less common examples in the field of medicine are working as a locum tenens physician and taking a sabbat-

ical. A much more common example would be block clinical scheduling, such as many SGIM members do for inpatient wards. Obviously, this strategy works better for some careers (e.g. inpatient or urgent care) than for others (e.g. primary care.) It has the potential for less organizational influence because you might not be there when important meetings are being held and decisions being made. However, it can be a very positive thing. My family will never forget the experiences we gained when I was so fortunate as to take a sabbatical, for example.

Another strategy that I have used regularly in my life is "outsourcing." Outsourcing involves off-loading certain responsibilities, usually for a fee, rather than doing them yourself. I remember when I first hired someone to clean my house, back when I was a fellow. My husband was willing to do his share of housework, but it became apparent that the cleanliness of our home was provoking needless conflict. It appears that we can look at the same exact bathroom and draw dramatically different conclusions about the amount and urgency of cleaning required. We all have enough stress as it is; it is worth it to decrease that stress when possible by strategically paying for services that you do not enjoy. Of course, you don't want to outsource the gardening if you love to garden, but this can be a useful strategy for creating time for the things you really want to accomplish. There are some tradeoffs you make, however. The most obvious is the tradeoff of money for time, but there is also the fact that the person you hire for a job will un-

doubtedly not do it exactly the way you would have done it. This issue is inherent in any type of delegation, however, and so better to learn early when not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

"Bundling" is a balancing strategy in which you put multiple purposes into a single activity. I see many SGIM members employing this strategy by bringing family to business meetings. I have tried to bring each of my children with me to at least one professional meeting (when they are old enough to stay alone for a while but young enough to get away without too much complaint from their teachers). Bundling also has the drawback of not offering the perfect experience—not perfect for work and not for the family member. But as an occasional strategy, bundling is worth serious consideration.

The alert reader will have noticed that I have not yet mentioned part-time work, which is probably the single most discussed strategy for achieving balance between work, relationships/home, and self-care. Yes, this is also a valuable strategy for attaining balance. In the *Beyond Juggling* framework, part-time work is one example of a strategy called "simplification." Simplification means making purposeful changes designed to uncomplicate professional and/or personal lives to improve balance. Part-time work is one example, but other examples include decreasing commitments to other organizations, accepting less influential or demanding roles, and (on the personal side) acquiring fewer possessions. Deciding on a

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simplification strategy requires clear thinking about your values, especially regarding professional aspirations and affluence versus deeper more satisfying relationships. For years, I have wished for a second home on the water, but I have also felt that such a purchase would unbalance my life too much. These kinds of decisions are very personal, and there truly is no "right" answer.

As a division chief, I find that my faculty are very heterogeneous in the strategies they employ to balance their lives. That is a good thing be-

cause it would be difficult to make things function at work if everyone wanted to employ the same strategy (e.g. having Mondays off work). The best strategy for you depends on your needs and the needs of those close to you. I encourage you to spend some time around the New Year thinking critically about whether one of these strategies could help to balance your life. If so, think about how you might actually get there. There is no single right path. I see one of my mentoring roles as helping faculty find a pathway to balance that

works for their circumstances and also works for our institution's mission. There are always tradeoffs inherent in balancing one's life, but a clear thinking about the values you hold will help greatly in determining the best pathway for you.

### Reference

1. Sandholtz K, Derr B, Carlson D, Buchner K. Beyond juggling: rebalancing your busy life. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002.

*SGIM*