Forget Work-Life Balance, Pursue Well-Being Instead

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Trying to fulfill professional, family, and personal responsibilities is a constant struggle for everyone. A Google search of work-life balance shows almost 200 million results. Juggling competing demands is especially hard for women. Today, women still have primary household and caregiving responsibilities, while most workplaces remain inflexible, with limited family policies and unrealistic expectations of 24/7 availability.

A failure to achieve work-life balance causes many people to experience high levels of stress. Chronic stress can lead to headaches, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular problems, diabetes, hormonal imbalances, and a weaker immune system. Stress also causes women to make decisions that have long-term consequences for their careers. In their failed struggle to find balance, many women feel their only option is to quit their jobs. Studies have found that almost half of women stop working at some point. Many later regret having walked away from a meaningful career.

The pursuit of work-life balance is an impossible goal. You might feel like you’ve achieved balance one day, but it won’t last. Work will continue to interfere with life, and life will interfere with work. A last-minute deadline might prevent you from getting to your daughter’s soccer match. You may miss an important meeting because you need to take your father to the doctor. If balance is your goal, you will surely fail.

A better goal is to improve your well-being. People with higher levels of well-being are better able to handle the difficulties associated with trying to combine work and life. And, unlike finding work-life balance, enhancing your well-being is an achievable goal.

There are two main dimensions that affect your well-being: feeling good and doing good. Feeling good is about experiencing positive emotions on a daily basis; doing good is about overall life satisfaction that comes from pursuing meaningful goals and making a positive impact. People who are high on the feeling-good and doing-good dimensions of well-being are thriving. They have both joy and meaning in their lives.
When you are thriving, you have psychological resources that help you deal with work-life conflict. Experiencing more frequent positive emotions boosts your energy level and self-confidence. Positive emotions help you think in more creative ways, so you can come up with solutions to better manage the chaos.

Also, experiencing frequent positive emotions makes you more resilient. And when you have a sense of meaning in life, you are less likely to get stressed by day-to-day hassles. Keeping the big picture in mind helps to put things into perspective. What’s more, knowing that what you are doing matters keeps you going.

Meanwhile, our workplaces desperately need to be redesigned to be more flexible and supportive. And caregiving and household responsibilities need to be shared more equally. But these changes won’t result in perfectly balanced lives.

So let’s change our focus. Let’s forget about balance and try to boost our well-being instead. Let’s increase the joy and meaning in your life so that you will thrive despite life’s challenges.