

Are you Struggling with Work-Family Balance? Let Purpose Guide You

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Focusing on what matters most can help ease the stress of competing work and family demands.

The idea of work-life balance has been around for decades, but today the combination of rising financial pressures, gig-work, cobbling together of part-time jobs, and (for white-collar workers) nonstop digital contact, flexible schedules, and remote work can make it difficult for many of us to ever truly “switch off.”

For some families, long hours are a necessity. But for others, the pressure to keep working can be rooted in a sense of obligation—to be ever more successful, maintain a certain lifestyle, or simply keep up with expectations shaped by a consumeristic and highly individualistic culture. No matter what the motivation, over time, these pressures can accumulate, leaving parents feeling stretched thin, chronically stressed, and out of balance.



So how should we think about balance?

We are seeing conversations about shorter workweeks and changing norms gain traction—and in fact, average work hours have been falling. Unfortunately, however, many experts say these trends are driven by serious burnout. According to Gallup, “overall employee well-being has been on the decline” and “employees now have less trust in institutions in general and feel more detached from their

employers.” Employee engagement is plummeting.

Perhaps in response, many people appear to be seeking jobs that allow for more balance. Many of us now carry an implicit vision of a “balanced” life as one in which we are living a “perfect” life: thriving at work, fully present with our families and friends, and consistently caring for our own well-being. That vision can be inspiring—but it can also be exhausting. Many wonder if balance is possible or even desirable. For most, the perfect balance seems out of reach.

Situations vary, but life inevitably involves trade-offs and “imperfections.” We are constantly deciding what to prioritize and, at times, what to let go—at least for a while. It’s no surprise that many parents report struggling to meet the demands of both work and family. But what if the challenge isn’t simply about achieving balance? What if it’s about how we’re approaching it?

In a recent article, researcher Jamie Alexander and her colleagues propose that when it comes to navigating work and family, it may be more helpful to begin with a different question: What gives my life a sense of purpose?

How purpose can help

Purpose is often defined as an enduring life goal that is meaningful to us personally and contributes to something beyond ourselves. Studies have found that people with a greater sense of purpose tend to experience a range of benefits, including greater life satisfaction and optimism, better sleep, healthier habits, and even reduced risk of certain health problems.

But what does this have to do with work-family balance?

Researchers suggest that work-family conflict—the sense that the two domains are interfering with each other—often arises from a few recurring patterns. These patterns include: stress spilling over from one domain into another, demands piling up beyond what feels manageable, shifts in long-established roles or responsibilities causing discomfort, conflicts between roles requiring difficult trade-offs, or a sense of being stuck in a role. These tensions don't just affect parents—they can ripple outward, shaping how we connect with and respond to our children.

A strong sense of purpose can act as an anchor in the midst of these competing demands.

Sharpen your sense of purpose by defining and committing to your goals.

Imagine coming home after a long day, already feeling depleted, only to discover your child hasn't done their homework. You try to get them to do it, but instead they get upset. In that moment, it's natural to feel overwhelmed or frustrated. But if part of your purpose is to raise a child who feels supported and grows into a compassionate, capable adult, that same moment may begin to look different. Instead of just another stressor, it can become an opportunity to live out that purpose—with patience, guidance, or curiosity.

Purpose doesn't remove life stressors. But it can change how we interpret and respond to them.

One study found that people with a stronger sense of purpose don't necessarily experience fewer daily stressors—but they tend to show smaller increases in difficult emotions, like anger, frustration, and loneliness, as well as physical symptoms, like headache, fatigue, or cough, in response to those stressors.

In that way, purpose might help to buffer against the stressors at the root of work-family conflict, making it easier for us to respond in ways that align with who we want to be. In doing so, a sense of purpose doesn't just support individual well-being—it can ripple outward, strengthening parenting, deepening family relationships, and fostering the conditions in which children can thrive.

Of course, some conflicts require real sacrifices. Time is finite, and we can't do everything.

Alexander and her colleagues' model suggests that instead of asking, "How do I perfectly balance all my responsibilities at work and at home?" we might ask a different question: "How do my choices align with what matters most to me?"

When we use purpose as a guide, decisions about what to prioritize—or let go—can become clearer. Rather than striving for an idealized balance, we begin to organize our lives around what feels meaningful, this in turn can help reduce the tension we feel when trying to balance our work and family life. Research finds that people with a stronger sense of purpose report experiencing less conflict between work and personal life—and are more likely to experience these domains as supporting one another, rather than competing.

How to cultivate purpose

For some, this idea may feel reassuring—you already have a sense of purpose but haven't fully used it to guide your decisions. For others, it may feel uncertain, especially if you don't feel clear about your purpose, you may be wondering what this all means for you.

The good news is that purpose can grow and evolve over time. Research points to a few practices that can help. At the heart of each of these practices is reflection.

1. Reconnect with your purpose as a parent. Parenting often asks us to keep showing up through uncertainty, stress, and moments when progress is hard to see. When challenges pile up, it's natural to question ourselves and lose touch with the deeper meaning behind our efforts. Taking the time to pause and reflect on our role as parents—and the hopes we have for our children—can help us reconnect with that deeper sense of purpose and stay invested even when things feel difficult.

Connect with your sense of purpose in your parenting by writing a short reflection.

2. Create a plan for your life. It's easy to move through life on autopilot, simply trying to get through the day amidst competing demands of work and family. Making space to reflect on our values, identify our goals, and create a plan for how we will pursue those goals can be especially meaningful when we feel disconnected from a sense of purpose. These steps help us realign our lives with what matters most in a way that feels more manageable.

3. Practice gratitude. Reflecting on the future and what we want for ourselves or our children can feel especially difficult when we're pulled in many directions. If we're not ready to start there, gratitude can offer a simpler place to begin. Taking a moment to notice and reflect on what we appreciate—small moments of connection with our children, support from a colleague, or a moment of laughter with our family—can help ground us in what matters most. Over time, these reflections can make it easier for us to identify where our sense of purpose lies.

Aligning work with purpose

Of course, not all of us have the freedom to change our circumstances in major ways. Financial needs, job constraints, and family responsibilities can limit our options.

But even within these constraints, small shifts can make a difference. Research on “job crafting” suggests that people can enhance the meaning of their work by making changes in three areas:

- Tasks: adjusting what they do, when possible;

- Mindset: reframing how they think about their work and its impact;
- Relationships: building stronger connections with others.

For those of us with limited flexibility in our roles, we might focus on changing how we think about our work and investing in relationships at work to make our days feel more meaningful. One study found that hospital cleaners who saw themselves as part of the care team—recognizing that their work contributes to patients' health—reported greater enjoyment and meaning in their jobs. It's the difference between seeing your role as simply mopping the floor versus seeing it as helping to prevent harm by keeping patients' environments clean and safe.

These shifts, while sometimes small, can help align our work with a broader sense of purpose—and in doing so, these shifts may ease the tensions between work and family. Research finds that parents who experience greater meaning in their work—scholars distinguish meaning from purpose, purpose forms part of one's sense of meaning—also report less work-family conflict, lower strain, and a stronger sense that their work and family lives enrich one another.

Work-family balance may be best viewed as something we aren't expected to fully "solve" once and for all. When we ground our choices in our purpose, we can move away from an exhausting search for equilibrium—and toward a life that feels more coherent, intentional, and connected to what truly matters.