

Choosing a finely balanced life

Success without balance and happiness is incomplete and leads to burnout and dissatisfaction. Azim Jamal guides you towards a more wholesome experience of living

Doing too much or too little leads to failure.

—J. Paul Getty

LIFE IS DIFFICULT. Many people rely on you: your boss, your colleagues, your customers, your spouse, your children, your parents and others. Their demands pull you in all directions, and you can't meet them all. It's often difficult to decide whom to gratify and whom to disappoint. The decisions require a delicate balancing act.

You can't perform this balancing act on pure instinct. Your decisions must be made consciously, and this requires an awareness of what you're doing and why you're doing it. Once you have learned to act consciously, your thoughts and your actions will become so integrated that you will make appropriate choices naturally, without agonising over them.

The meaning of Life Balance

The whole of Creation is founded on balance. All its diverse elements have come together in just the right proportion to create this beautiful and fleeting moment in time and space that we call life. Creation, in its innate wisdom, never favours one and excludes another—because everything brings its own unique hue to the kaleidoscope.



Going all-out pursuing every objective is a recipe for burn-out. Rather, pick your objectives and pursue them at an optimum pace

And were it not for the delicate balance within each, life wouldn't be as we know it.

Speaking on balance, the Indian mystic Osho said, "A tree's roots go down into the earth, and its branches spread towards the stars. Its blossoms flower into the sky, its nourishment comes from the deepest part of the earth. It is always balanced; higher the tree goes, the deeper its roots. You cannot have a Cedar of Lebanon, a 400- or 500-year old tree, rising so high in the sky, with small roots—it will fall down immediately. Life needs a balance between the depth and the height."

Life Balance can be viewed in many ways. It can be a balance between home and work. It can be a state of balance in one's physical, mental, emotional, financial, and spiritual health. When you are in Life Balance, you are able to spend sufficient time, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in areas that you have defined as important to you. Life Balance is a state of feeling and being. You know intuitively that you are doing the right things, and you're able to navigate through the many opportunities and challenges. You know what is important to you and you are able to choose appropriately.

Life Balance is not a static condition. It is a dynamic and evolving blend of the body, mind, and spirit. To know what Life Balance means to you, it's essential to know what areas of your life are most important to you. I believe that life is balanced when we are centred. Being centred allows us to find equilibrium amid flux and change.

You are centred when you have a set of principles that are well grounded. When you're centred, you know what you want and why you want it. This comes from clarity of purpose. This clarity allows you to navigate through changes without compromising your core values and principles. You become like an orchestra. It has diverse players and different instruments, yet all are synchronised

to produce a beautiful symphony. This is how you synchronise your body, mind, and spirit to your purpose. You are able to make life decisions from your core values and principles, rather than succumbing to a reactive, "fire fighting" mode.

Being balanced means catering to your own needs as well as those of your family and the society you live in. You become an asset to the world you live in.

Moderation is the key

An airline pilot who picks up a tail wind, opens his throttle, and points his aircraft in the general direction of his intended destination may make excellent time. But when he arrives, he may find himself at the wrong airport.

Going all-out, all the time, in pursuit of every objective is a recipe for burn-out. To achieve Life Balance, it's necessary to pick your objectives and to pursue them at the optimum pace, which means the fastest sustainable pace.

It doesn't help to go at the fastest sustainable pace if you don't have a clear idea of where you're going.

A clear vision helps balance Ying and Yang

To master the balancing act in life, you must have a clear vision and a commitment to make the vision a reality. You can't waste energy pursuing all the possibilities that are out there for you. You must decide which possibility you want to zero in on, and focus everything you do on this objective. [Read *The Power of Clarity*, Complete Wellbeing, October 2012]

You must also understand all the aspects of your life, and keep them in balance. Taoists explain this as a balance between Ying and Yang. Ying and Yang represent the balance of opposites in the universe. When Ying and Yang are in balance, all is calm. When one outweighs the other, confusion and disarray set in.

Buddhism recommends the "middle path"—the one between the opposite

extremes of luxury and hardship. The laws of the "Eightfold Path" were designed to guide people without making life too strict or too easy. They represented balance.

Staying in balance requires that you understand your whole being. You must know your physical, mental and spiritual needs, and you must bring them into congruence. If you don't understand how each contributes to the whole of your being, you may end up catering to one facet of your life at the expense of the whole. If you understand the whole in relation to its parts, you can determine the amount of time and effort to invest in each facet.

To acquire balance means to achieve that happy medium between the *minimum* and the *maximum* that represents your *optimum*. The minimum is the least you can get by with. The maximum is the most you're capable of. The optimum is the amount or degree of

anything that is the most favourable towards the ends you desire.

In his book *Stairway to Success*, Nido Qubein gives the example of the Marathon runner who goes all-out for the first mile. This person will take an early lead, but the victory will go to the runner who strikes the highest *sustainable* pace. If your pace is too slow, the others will pass you. If it's too fast, you'll run out of energy before you reach the end of the race. You have to choose a happy medium.

You need to strike the same kind of balance in your personal habits and behaviour. If at work you try to produce the maximum, you may face burnout. If you go for the minimum you will get poor results and will not tap into your potential.

Let us look at some aspects of your life that call for balance between Ying and Yang; that call for pursuing the "Middle Path"; that benefit from adopting the fastest *sustainable* pace.

It doesn't help to go at the fastest sustainable pace if you don't have a clear idea of where you're going



» Head vs Heart

“Your reason and passion are the rudder and the sails of the seafaring soul,” wrote Kahlil Gibran, the great Lebanese-born philosopher, poet, and painter. “If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas.”

An equilibrium between reason and passion—between head and heart—is one of the essentials of Life Balance. It has been said that when the mind and the heart go to war, the body becomes the battlefield.

The mind allows us to think, to reason, and to apply our wisdom to make a difference. The heart is where we feel. Through it, we love and use our creativity without inhibition. When we merge education of the mind with education of the heart, we strike a dynamic balance. We look with “both eyes”—the eye of the heart and the eye of the mind. We look at life as a whole, realising that one element affects the other.

Reason without passion is lame, and passion without reason is blind. Reason alone is dull, whereas passion alone can lead to destruction. When we marry the two, we have a wonderful synergy. Our reasoning protects us from doing silly things. Our passion gives us the drive to excel and go the distance.

» Home vs Career

The balancing of home and career is the most common challenge that executives face. Many feel compelled to make a choice between home and career. Studies show that those who are employed outside the home cannot balance work and family demands. Most give higher priority to their work than they do to their families. Life Balance makes that stark choice unnecessary.

We’re living in the age of burn-out, in which workaholics pursue frenetic lifestyles that hog their time, drain their resources, and leave them empty and unfulfilled. Many people engage in activity for activity’s sake, burying themselves in work or play to avoid facing real personal and spiritual needs. Others are in love with money, and seek to express that love by spending all their waking

hours pursuing their careers. But truly successful people know that balance is essential to achievement, and they make room for quality time for family, friends, spiritual interests, and hobbies.

Lee Iacocca, as president of the Ford Division of Ford Motor Company and CEO of Chrysler, put in long days on the job. But he was also committed to staying home every weekend, enjoying time with his family, going to church, and reflecting on his life and times.

» Independence vs Interdependence

“No man is an island,” wrote John Donne, 17th century English poet and churchman. We are all dependent on our fellow humans, and they are dependent on us. We are individuals with our own unique traits, but we are also tied to other individuals through bonds of family, religion, culture, community, nation, and many other commonalities. Our happiness depends, to a large extent, on how well we strike the balance between our independence as individuals and our interdependence with others.

When you foster strong and healthy relationships with others, especially those who are closest to you, the balancing act becomes easier. These healthy relationships provide a foundation for pursuing common goals. They also give you the confidence to pursue individual interests on your own. But if you don’t cultivate healthy and strong relationships, achieving balance will always seem like an uphill battle. Strong, healthy relationships don’t just happen. They require a huge investment of time and effort before they become reality.

Among the most sadly neglected areas of interdependence is the one shared between husband and wife. If you’re married, the marital relationship must take priority over all other human relationships if you are to achieve Life Balance. Too many marriages have floundered on the shoals of indifference and neglect. All too many men and women, hard-pressed for time, have suddenly discovered that time has run out for the person

at their side. After years of playing second fiddle to jobs, careers, hobbies and other activities; after too many evenings deprived of the company of a soul mate; after too many meals in which conversation was no deeper than “pass the salt,” or “are you through with the newspaper?” the marriage partner opts out—emotionally, physically, or both.

So don’t miss a chance to take a pleasant walk with your wife, smelling the roses as you go. Don’t miss an opportunity to take in a good movie with your husband. Look for shared experiences that will provide fuel for pleasant conversations far into the future.


Invest your time and heart in relationships with others who are close to you: your children, your extended family, your colleagues and your friends. Enhanced relationships lead to Life Balance and to joy in living.

The question of job vs. family doesn’t need

to be an either/or proposition. For example, one day I returned home late from work to find my son Tawfiq, who was eight years old then, eager to play video games. Tawfiq was on a break from school and had been waiting all day for his dad to come home.

The next morning, I was scheduled to make an important business presentation before 40 senior executives. *Should I disappoint Tawfiq and concentrate on polishing my presentation? Or should I use the evening to nurture my relationship with my son?*

I chose to take Tawfiq to a video arcade. I later realised that the evening with my son was good for Tawfiq and good for business. It was a valuable chance to knit even closer the father/son relationship. And it took my mind off business long enough for me to shed my stress and approach the presentation in a fresh and relaxed frame of mind. The



Invest your time and heart in relationships with those who are close to you

It's time to stop postponing your dreams and your happiness. It's time to bring your beliefs and your actions into congruence

presentation drew plaudits. I was a success at home and at work. It wasn't the result of good luck. It was the result of a good choice. It was the result of a balanced decision.

The balance between independence and interdependence has become critical in this age of diversity. Stephen Covey, in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, explained that we are living in an age that values independence; yet we occupy a globe that is interconnected as it has never been before. This has created a massive imbalance. We all need to learn to make choices that lead us to invest time and effort in building trust, appreciating diversity, and valuing and respecting others.

Covey's advice: "Seek first to understand; then to be understood." What this means is that we must first seek to understand people who are different from us before we can expect them to understand us. Once we understand our own place in this interconnected world, we are better equipped to balance this interdependence with a healthy level of independence.

A healthy understanding of others is impossible unless you have a healthy understanding of yourself. A good relationship with yourself enables you to cultivate good relationships with others. It is an inside-out approach.

» Do it now vs Do it later

One of the songs sung at the funeral of the assassinated President William McKinley in 1901 was "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere." Written in 1897, it was about an imaginary land in which the sun was shining, the songbirds dwelled, and conditions were perfect. One of its verses begins this way:

*Somewhere the day is longer,
Somewhere the task is done...*

Many people spend their lives dreaming

about the "Isle of Somewhere" but never getting any closer to it. The isle remains indefinitely "somewhere"; the day is always "some day"; the accomplishment is always in the future.

Such people dream of taking that family vacation "some day"; of pursuing that hobby "some day"; of losing weight, or spending more time with their parents, or enjoying some other enjoyable experience in that misty "some day" on the "beautiful Isle of Somewhere."

It's time to stop postponing your dreams and your happiness. It's time to bring your beliefs and your actions into congruence. If what you do is not aligned with what you dream—if your actions are not aligned with your principles—you're out of balance.

"Some day" is meaningless. "Today" is what counts. Sure, it's easy to let things slide; to put off bringing your life into balance. The worthwhile things in life require effort. But the rewards for persistence are sweet. Make the right choices today. Tomorrow, you'll be glad you did.

Life Balance manifests itself in many ways. It may be in the accomplishment of goals you set for yourself after leaving high school. It may be in the satisfaction that comes from the contributions you've made at work and in the security of having a retirement plan. You may achieve it through making friends or in cultivating outside interests such as the theatre or sports. You may find it in a family life that suits your needs and standards. And you may find it in a set of ethics that you yourself have defined.

All these areas add up to the sum of your life. Look them over and decide whether you're satisfied with all of them. If you see areas where improvement is needed, go to work on them. Do it here and now. Don't wait until "some day" on the "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere."

Balance in your business life

Life Balance can bring richness to your personal life that goes far beyond the

possession of material things, and significance to your business life that goes far beyond financial success.

Here are some things to consider as you seek balance in your business life:

» Slow vs Fast

"Slow but sure wins the race," is the moral of Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare. "He who hesitates is lost," states the oft-quoted adage. Life Balance requires a middle course between these two pieces of wisdom. Doing things quickly can save you time, and that time may be spent doing more important things. But doing things in a rush, before you've had time to think through the repercussions, can land you quickly in the wrong place. Life Balance requires that you know what results you expect before you take action. It requires that you focus first on where you're going and how you plan to get there. It requires an assessment of obstacles and strategies for overcoming these obstacles. Only when you're focussed on the destination, the ways, and the means, is it advisable to proceed with all due speed.

» Taking risks vs Playing it safe

If you risk too much, you may lose everything. If you risk nothing, you will gain nothing. Taking risks is a balancing act. Intelligent risk-taking is a key to success in any endeavour. How do you know when to take a risk and when to play it safe? Here's Nido Quiben's advice:

The process of risk analysis is not that complicated. Before embarking on a venture, answer these questions:

- (1) What is the best thing that could result from this action?
- (2) What is the worst that could result from this action?
- (3) What is the most likely result of this action?

If the **most likely** result would take you toward your vision, and you're willing to deal with the **worst possible** result in exchange for a shot at the **best possible** result, go ahead with the venture.

» Focus vs Being distracted

"For everything there is a season," wrote the wise King Solomon, "and a time for every purpose under heaven."

So, when you've set aside time for a specific purpose, should you allow interruptions and distractions to break your focus? Some



Life Balance enables you to know when to keep your focus and when to surrender to the distraction

people are easily distracted. They'll stop what they're doing at the drop of a hat and enter into an unrelated conversation, focus on a different train of thought, or embark on a different task. Others become so absorbed in what they're doing that they're oblivious of everything going on around them. It practically takes an explosion to break their focus.

Life Balance enables you to know when to keep your focus and when to surrender to the distraction. If you allow yourself to be distracted by every minor interruption, every unplanned circumstance, you'll never accomplish anything constructive. But, as Solomon reminds us, there's "a time to keep silence and a time to speak."

Suppose your teenage daughter wants to talk to you heart to heart about a problem she's facing. Should you ignore her in favour of the column of figures you're adding up, the speech outline you're working on, or the specifications you're drawing up for an important project?

A few minutes invested in connecting with your daughter will, in the long run, more than compensate for a few minutes in which your business interests are put aside.

Balance in your personal life

Balance in your personal life goes far beyond the accumulation of money and goods. At the end of the day, it's not how much you've enriched your material assets that counts; it's how much you've enriched your life, and through it, the lives of others.

How can Life Balance bring richness to your personal life? Here are some areas in which to cultivate balance:

» Receiving vs Giving

It may surprise you to learn that it isn't enough to be a generous giver. Life Balance requires that you also be a gracious receiver. Giving and receiving are opposite sides of the same coin. For every gift there must be a receiver. If everybody gave and nobody received, to whom would we give?

There is joy in giving, so allow other

people to give as well so they can also experience joy. When you perform as an artist and people applaud, allow them to finish their applause; people want to show their appreciation. Be worthy of both giving and receiving.

Kahlil Gibran explained the two-way benefits of giving and receiving this way:

"It is the pleasure of the bee to gather the honey of the flower, but it is also the pleasure of the flower to yield its honey to the bee... and to both, bee and the flower, the giving and receiving of pleasure is a need and an ecstasy."

» Less vs More

You want to accomplish as much as you can. But when you aim strictly for volume, you may be adding accomplishments that add very little to your happiness or balance. Suppose someone were to show you a large bin containing a mixture of \$100 bills and discarded tissue paper and offer to let you keep whatever you could remove in 30 seconds. Would you scoop up the contents by the handful, or would you quickly pick out the \$100 bills and ignore the tissue paper?

You'd be most likely to go for the \$100 bills, for they'd be far more valuable than the tissue paper. Picking up the tissue paper would simply distract you from picking up the important stuff.

In life, too, the best strategy is to focus on what is important and do it first. The person who does more is not always the person who succeeds. It's better to do a little that moves you toward your goals than to do a lot that gets you nowhere. And if an action moves you farther from your goals, it's best to heed the words of Chinese author and scholar Lin Yutang: "Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of nonessentials."

» Hard work vs Laziness

A life of total leisure is the hardest career to pursue. But being overworked can cause stress and anxiety, which inhibit productivity. Life Balance means finding a middle ground between the two.



A few moments spent in total relaxation can be more productive than hundreds of hours spent at hard labour

Quiet time can lead to ingenious ideas. A few moments spent in total relaxation can be more productive than hundreds of hours spent at hard labour. Archimedes, the ancient physicist and mechanical engineer, was given the task of determining whether a crown made for the king was of pure gold. The solution to the problem came to him as he lay in a bathtub.

Relaxation paid off for Archimedes. But if you spend all your time relaxing and meditating, your ideas will never make it out of your imagination. To implement your ideas, there's no substitute for action. So dream to bring your future into focus and act to bring it into reality.

Short-term imbalance

Once in a while, it may be necessary to allow for temporary imbalance as a means to achieve long-term goals. Such imbalance is tolerable, even desirable, if it is just for a short time. But if it continues longer, it can lead to danger. An author working on a book

may have to work extra-long hours to meet a deadline, or may have to go to extraordinary lengths to conduct research. Athletes training for the Olympics may have to push their bodies extra hard to whip them into shape for world-class competition. A contractor may have to push extra hard to bring a project in on time and avoid severe monetary penalties.

An occasional imbalance is OK if you're working toward something that will contribute to long-range stability. But make sure that the imbalance is temporary. And don't forget let your family and others close to you know what to expect.

» Material responsibility vs Spiritual responsibility

At the end of the day we leave this world as we came—with nothing. So in the final analysis, material things become short-term and spiritual things long-term. But if we ignore our material responsibilities, we won't be able to sustain our spiritual side. So the

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balance between the two is important. In fact, if we were to marry the two it would be a good blend: pursuing material things with a spiritual foundation. We have multiple needs and we cannot ignore our spirituality by being obsessed with material wellbeing. My friend once asked her mother how she would live her life if she were given a second chance. She responded: “I would try to make twice as much difference in people’s lives.”

The ultimate aim: well-balanced health

In this modern world, where wealthy leisure is often held out as the ultimate goal, many individuals have stood at the pinnacle of success only to find themselves looking down into the grave.

Paul almost became one of them. He was a senior vice president of a major corporation. He had been engrossed in climbing the corporate ladder, and was on the verge of realising a lifelong dream: promotion to CEO.

Then he was hit by a series of distressing developments. First he learned that his teenage daughter had a drinking problem, apparently arising from her feeling that her parents were neglecting her. Then his doctor told him he suffered from a heart problem and would need an operation. Then he received a letter from his wife’s lawyer—accompanied by separation papers. It caught him totally by surprise, though warning signs had been there for months. He had been so focused on his work that he had turned a blind eye toward his family and his health, and never realised it.

He recognised—just in time—that his life was out of balance and that success could not be sustained unless balance was restored. He made some conscious new choices, began putting his family and health first, and in two years turned his life around.

To accomplish this turnaround, Paul

- » turned down the CEO position and opted to continue to work as senior vice president.
- » gave up part of his salary to hire an executive assistant to help him with his many administrative duties.
- » committed to building friendship with his teenage daughter. He accepted her problem, showed her unconditional love, and scheduled regular weekly meetings with her.
- » went to counselling sessions with his wife to iron out their marital issues. He showed her that she mattered the most to him.
- » hired a personal trainer and worked with her three days a week. He also switched to a healthier diet.

Roger and Rebecca Merrill, in their insightful book *Life Matters* use the term “navigation intelligence” to refer to the ability to make the choices that create what we want to have in our lives. Paul intelligently navigated his way back into Life Balance. But he began the balancing act as a reaction to his problems. If he had been proactive from the start, he might have avoided his heart condition, averted his daughter’s drinking problem, and headed off his marital conflict before it became a crisis.

The good news is that no matter where you are in life, you can always make a fresh start. Where attention goes, energy flows. When Paul turned his attention toward his family and health situation, results changed—gradually but effectively.

Some practical tips

1. The hour of power

In my book, *The Corporate Sufi*, I have suggested: “Practice the ‘hour of power’ first thing in the morning: 20 minutes of meditation. 20 minutes of exercise. 20 minutes of reading something inspiring. Go to sleep an hour earlier.”

Starting your day with an hour of power gives you a head start. Generally, if you leave things for the end of the day, they don’t get done. So I recommend that you start your day with things that are important in your life.

2. Smart use of time

Another way of finding balance is to combine two important activities. Try listening to educational CDs while driving or running on a treadmill. Or spend 20 minutes a day walking with your spouse, child or a friend. That way, you make sure you are spending time with the people in your life who are important, and are still getting your exercise. By scheduling weekly family activities, exercise, reading, or prayer time, you can ensure that you do not overlook them in your busy week.

3. “Undo list”

Eliminate unimportant elements from your life. If you can’t eliminate them, delegate them. If you can’t delegate them, postpone them. Then choose those remaining very important things in your life and execute them. In other words, execute around a tight set of priorities. Be proactive in putting important things in your life first.

4. Let principles, values, and ethics guide you

Whatever you do, be guided by principles, values, and ethics and make appropriate choices that invite Life Balance. The key is to

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exercise integrity in the moment of choice; otherwise, everything becomes a theory with no practical application.

As you can see from the above, the balancing act is needed in many areas of life. Don’t be overwhelmed by the many different possibilities. Focus on your vision and principles, and let them be the foundation for everything you do. Having a vision and keeping your feet on the ground will help you with the balancing act and will invite integrity and harmony into your life.

Parts of this article were excerpted from the book Life Balance Is Your Choice by Nido Qubein and Azim Jamal

