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Work/life balance: how to get it right

Advice from the leading US life coach for a working mother-of-five who finds herself overwhelmed by laundry and an untidy house.



Fiona McWilliam, 42, is a freelance architectural journalist. She lives in Brighton with her husband Paul Wheeler, who is editorial director for the Thames Gateway forum. They have five children aged between 12 and 3, and Fiona works from home three days a week.

"I love the three-day balance, but I can sense that my efficiency is declining as domestic distractions take over. I spend an inordinate amount of time doing laundry, I can never seem to find anything, and when the cleaning lady comes, which is once a

fortnight, I spend all my time tidying up around her so that she can actually clean.

"I like to think that I've never been the sort of woman to be bothered by a little mess, but more recently, on the few occasions when the house has been really tidy, I've noticed how happy and relaxed it makes me feel. I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but living in chaos is getting me down."

Fiona's typical working day

- 6.10am** Alarm goes off. One of us will go downstairs to sort out the dog and make some tea. Billy, 5, and Patrick, 3, come into our bed.
- 6.45** Throw some clothes on - no time for shower - and go round brutally switching on bedroom lights to get children out of bed.
- 7.00** Put porridge on - with five children, I've stopped allowing them breakfast options. Paul starts on packed lunches while I get the two little ones dressed.
- 7.20** Drop Patrick off at nursery down the road.
- 7.30** Paul leaves for train to London. Finish packed lunches. Often Nancy, 7, will suddenly announce that she needs to take a cake to school. I'm bad at reading school letters, so I only have myself to blame for the last-minute panic.
- 8.15** Digby, 12, walks himself to school while I'm trying to find lost shoes and a decent hairbrush for the girls.
- 8.30** Leave with Sybil, 10, Nancy and Billy for 15-minute walk to their primary school.
- 8.50** After dropping children off, meet friend Julia for half-hour dog walk followed by quick coffee at my house.
- 9.45** Start work. I've just relinquished my study at home to give us a laundry room. I do up to four loads a day and the washing was taking over the house. I can work only when the children are out of the house anyway, so I now operate from the living room. The morning is taken up with e-mailing, phone calls and editing - I produce a quarterly business magazine and run a website.
- 12.30pm** I'll take a break and wander up to the supermarket to get something in for tea. I'll also grab something to eat - I tend to graze through the day.

- 2.00** Have a bath. Sounds decadent, I know, but it is the only time in the day that I have to myself.
- 2.30** I find it hard to get back into a work groove in the afternoons. I might dabble with some e-mails, or sort some washing.
- 3.30** Digby and Sybil arrive home from school. Nancy and Billy stay at an after-school club two days a week so that I can work on. But I am also preparing supper by now and supervising homework/play.
- 5.30** Collect Nancy and Billy and pick up Patrick from nursery on way home.
- 6.00** Children's supper.
- 6.30-7.30** Bath and bed for three younger ones. Paul arrives home at 7.20, just in time to read a bedtime story.
- 8.00** Flop at the table, open a bottle of wine, eat with Paul and spend half an hour talking through each other's day. Have started doing tennis on Mondays and yoga on Thursdays to give me some time out.
- 9.30** Bed.

Life coach Ginger Cockerham says:

Fiona said she has known for quite a while that she needed to make changes, but just hadn't known where to start. In writing to The Times, she had already begun a shift in her thinking.

I asked her why the domestic chores were all her responsibility. She said that her husband is always willing to help but arrives home in the evening exhausted. I asked her what the responsibilities are for the older children. She said that her mother was a domestic goddess who always said it was easier to do housework herself. I asked Fiona if it was fair to her children not to be given the opportunity to contribute to the family. She said she had never thought of it that way. She said it will make a huge difference when her older children do their own laundry and pack their own lunches each day, so she is putting that into practice immediately.

Fiona is orderly with work, but notoriously disorganised with the children's schedules. By committing to chart the children's school activities on a calendar as soon as they arrive home, she can eliminate the chaos that occurs many mornings. She is also scheduling a cleaning lady twice a week rather than once a fortnight and has decided to order her food online. That decision has forced her to plan a full week of menus rather than running out to the shop each day.

Summary: The first step in making an important change in your life is to acknowledge what is not working. By eagerly collaborating in my life coaching, Fiona was able to create an action plan that brings more order into her family's life and will make her feel happier and more relaxed in her home.

How are they faring?

Mother-of-three Catherine Rogers, 45, a self-employed communications consultant, contacted Ginger because she felt that, although she was accomplishing a lot in both her work and personal life, she was managing neither terribly well. She was struggling to make several business projects happen (eg, creating a website). Ginger encouraged her to fix deadlines and to use visualisation to help her to meet her goals.

What was the outcome?

Catherine: "The coaching brought a lot of clarity: I learnt, among other things, that I want to write a pocket-size book - so now I have two deadlines: for a website and a book! I have realised that I can't meet my original deadline of June 30, but I am now free of the feeling that I'm not doing anything well enough, and I can see that that job will be completed eventually."

Ginger: "Like many women who combine professional life with motherhood, Catherine saw herself as busy but never doing anything really well. That mindset created self-doubt.

By visualising what she was doing, Catherine realised that in fact she was meeting all her deadlines, while maintaining a flexible enough schedule to be there every day for her children. As a result, she can celebrate what she has accomplished rather than worrying about it and judging herself harshly. Now she has set a new deadline to finish her website, she is confident that it will be completed."