

Balance between work and private life

Balls in the air

You want to be successful in your work, you want to keep your house in order, cook healthy meals, exercise enough, maintain your social contacts, be there for your children and your partner, do personal development and occasionally have time for yourself. That's quite a job; how do you fit all that into the time you have? And moreover, regularly something happens in your life that requires extra time and energy from you: a sick family member, a relocation, a promotion, a relationship that is just beginning -- or ending. More balls to keep in the air.

When people talk about a disturbed work-life balance, it's almost always about a lack of free time. Or, it is a lack of energy to spend your free time really effectively. It then feels as if there are too many obligations and too few possibilities to recharge. It doesn't make much sense to simply look at the time you spend at work and at the time you spend on your private life. It may well be that you get a lot of energy from your work, but that your private life costs a lot of energy.

It makes more sense to determine your balance between the things in your life that cost you energy, and the things in your life that recharge you. Those things could be either in your private life or in your work, it doesn't really matter. After all, your life is the sum of all of the parts.

Using a scale as a model

A handy way to gain insight into your work-life balance is the so-called scale model. You can see your life as a scale. On one side of the scale, you have the load you have to carry, on the other side of the scale you have the strength to carry that load.



Load to Carry

Load bearing capacity

Load to carry

Load to carry (pressure) is everything that makes life difficult. This takes energy. This could include:

- Everyday hassles (e.g. being stuck in traffic jams, a leak at home, a fall-out with a colleague, a child who has the flu)
- Chronic stressful working conditions (e.g. excessive workload, protracted conflicts, difficulty with your work schedule)
- Chronic stressful private circumstances (e.g. caring for a loved one, chronic illness, financial problems)
- Important life events (birth of a child, death of a loved one, divorce, dismissal, new job...)

Load bearing capacity

The other side of the scale is formed by your load bearing capacity. Load-bearing capacity is everything that ensures that you can handle events in your life well. Your load bearing capacity consists of your own ability to prevent and deal with stress. Load-bearing capacity is increased by:

- Your physical health and lifestyle. Everyone knows the list: healthy eating, enough exercise, no smoking, being moderate with alcohol, enough sleep... Being fit and healthy contributes enormously to your load bearing capacity.
- The way you deal with problems (coping style) and character traits. Being able to stand up for yourself, being able to put things into perspective a little bit, asking for help if necessary, these are all ways to increase your load bearing capacity. Worrying, drinking, or getting angry about everything and with everyone, are less convenient ways of dealing with problems. It helps if you think positively about yourself, if you don't set the bar too high, if you are generally optimistic.
- Relaxing and recharging: In addition to all the 'musts' in life, it is important to plan time to recharge. This can be done through specific relaxation exercises, but also through relaxing activities such as reading, taking a walk and going into town with someone.
- The support you get from your surroundings. Social contacts are important for emotional support, practical help and company. In short: the feeling of not being alone is important.
- Time management. The better you organise your life, the more balls you can have in the air. And the better you can take a punch. Think about how you can make things easier for yourself, and how you set priorities. The book *Getting Things Done* by David Allen is highly recommended if you want to know more about this.

When things are going well, you feel like you're in balance. Your load and capacity to handle it will then be in equilibrium. When this happens, you'll feel less stressed.

Getting out of balance

If the balance between your load bearing and load capacity is disturbed (for a long period of time), you may develop (stress) symptoms. This is what we call *overburdening*. Common stress symptoms are: irritability, difficulty concentrating, being emotionally more unstable, worrying, sleeping problems, no longer being able to cope well with hustle and bustle or stimuli, the feeling that it is all becoming too much for you. Such symptoms are a signal from your body that you are asking too much of yourself. It's good and useful that your body applies the brakes. At the same time, your load bearing capacity is further reduced by these problems. You're less able to handle the load. If you keep going anyway, you could end up in a negative spiral.

Getting back into balance

A first step is to gain insight into your personal 'scale'. What, at this moment, does the balance between your carrying capacity and the load you must carry look like? Is the balance disturbed? What can you change in order to reduce your load, or to increase your carrying capacity? What areas in your life can you influence yourself?

It is important to realise that staying in balance is a *skill*, not a final state. There's not one moment when you're simply *in balance*.. You have to keep on balancing. Your load is different every time, and so is your carrying capacity. The better you can notice this, and the faster you can adjust, the closer you stay to the ideal balance. This even applies if life gives you a push.

What if we are no longer able to make adjustments?

First of all: take stress symptoms seriously! It is normal to experience stress from time to time, but this should not become a chronic condition. The sooner you catch this, the easier it is to solve. A first step can be to map out your scale with your partner, a family member or a friend and look for solutions. A fresh look at your situation can help enormously.

If that doesn't help enough, you can also get professional help. Sometimes just a few conversations are enough to get a grip on the situation.