

Jennifer Loucks

PharmD, BCPS



Work–Life Balance Is Baloney

Jennifer is a clinical coordinator and new mom who shares her journey in developing a career and personal life. She outlines specific ways she and her husband make their lives work. Her approach focuses on minimizing the guilt about working while also raising a young daughter.

Jennifer is currently Clinical Coordinator–Ambulatory Pharmacy Services and Residency Program Director, postgraduate year 2 (PGY2) ambulatory care pharmacy residency, The University of Kansas Health System, Kansas City, Kansas. Previously she was Clinical Pharmacist–Ambulatory Solid Organ Transplant/Hepatology. She received her PharmD (2009) from The University of Kansas, School of Pharmacy, Lawrence, Kansas and completed an ASHP-accredited PGY1 pharmacy practice residency and PGY2 solid organ transplant/immunology residency at Houston Methodist Hospital, Houston, Texas.

Jennifer's advice is: Do not look at life as a flat road but rather as peaks and valleys. Trying to achieve a work–life balance is like expecting to only find that flat road.



Dear Colleague,

A lot of time is spent talking about work–life balance and how to obtain it. Even more time is spent trying to achieve it. Although it's important to devote time to each, I'm not sure that balance is what we should strive for. I would argue that ***balance is baloney***. I must admit I didn't come up with this concept myself. I attended a talk that focused on this theme, and it has stuck with me.

When you think about a work–life balance, you’re usually focused on striving for equilibrium between the two. The statement itself implies that there is a competition between the two: your work and your life are competing for your time. If you are trying to achieve this type of balance, you are almost always going to produce an imbalance resulting in a feeling of failure or guilt. So, ask yourself if it makes sense at every point in our lives to devote equal amounts of ourselves to work and to life. I would argue it does not.

Throughout your life and your career, it makes more sense to tilt the scales in one direction or the other to achieve satisfaction and growth instead of balance. Residency is an example. You are taking one or two years of your life to train to gain the skills and experiences of three to five years in practice. *Do you think you’re going to maintain equilibrium between work and life during those years?* No, almost certainly not and that’s OK. For many pharmacists, part of the reason they complete a residency is to dedicate time to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to practice in a specific position or obtain their dream job. By taking a year or two and focusing more time on work than life, you can obtain your dream job faster. Then you can shift the equilibrium the other way and focus a bit more on life, while maintaining an enjoyable and rewarding career. Conversely, if you are only focused on maintaining a balance between work and life, and for this reason alone didn’t dedicate those years to training, it will probably take you much longer to achieve your dream job. Additionally, you run the risk of being less satisfied with work while on this path. By putting the right amount of your focus on work or life at various times, you can achieve satisfaction in both.

I believe it’s entirely possible to love both your work and your non-work lives. Furthermore, work is a huge part of life; so if you don’t like your work, figure out what you need to change to start loving it. If you enjoy what you do, work isn’t work. Let me tell you a bit of my story.

I truly enjoyed my two years of residency. I was very focused on work and although I developed strong relationships with my co-residents, I was far from maintaining balance or equilibrium between work and life. Much more of my time and energy went to work because it was an opportunity to get everything I could out of those years. During my training years, my shift was toward work and away from life.

After completing my residency, I had my dream job. I was a clinical pharmacist, taking care of patients with the disease state I loved. I had opportunities to complete research, teach, and work with students and residents. All things I had wanted to do. I had job satisfaction. Additionally, I was finally able to focus on life more. I could spend time with friends and family, try new restaurants, work out, cook, travel, and do all the other things I loved to do—all because I dedi-

cated myself to work during residency. Even then, I didn't strive for a balance between the two. Because I had satisfaction with both, I didn't mind dedicating extra time to work because I didn't dread work; I really enjoyed it.

Then things changed. My father passed away suddenly, and it was time to tilt the scales again. I lived in Texas, and my newly widowed mother lived in South Dakota and I needed to be there for her. Family comes first, and it was time to focus more on life and less on work. I took a few weeks off, but once I was back at work, I continued to focus on life. I maintained my career, but this was the time to say "no" to an extra research project or presentation. It was time to focus on life, and take care of myself and my family.

As we all know well, life is far from simple or stagnant. Do not look at it as a flat road but rather as peaks and valleys. Trying to achieve a work-life balance is like expecting to only find that flat road. Don't try to do it; ***balance is baloney***, and you should focus on work and life in the amount you need at each point in your life. I don't want this message to be misconstrued that you should focus on life so much that you do a poor job at work— that is far from the case. You can absolutely be successful at both. It's important to figure out how to do both well because, as your life and your career grow, you will be depended on more in both. Sometimes this will occur at the same time, sometimes at different times. ***The ability to tip your scale in the correct direction at the right time is critical for your overall happiness and success.***

Take, for example, my current situation. My husband and I recently had our first child, who is now 5 months old. I have been back at work for about 2 months, and numerous people have asked me things like: "How is it being back? Do you wish you were home? Are you glad to be back?" I have thought a lot about this, and talked to other moms in similar situations. What I keep going back to is the feeling that I want to do both. I'm not sad to go to work, because I enjoy my work. I also love to be with our daughter, so I wish I could do both full time. Both are incredibly important to me, so I've tried to figure out a way to do both while not driving myself crazy or over-extending and doing a poor job at one or the other.

At the same time, my responsibilities at work have grown. I took on a new role as a clinical coordinator and as a Residency Program Director that included starting a new residency program. Just because I was a new mom didn't mean I couldn't continue to advance my career and do things I enjoyed at work to maintain a job that I loved. I had to figure out a way to continue to be dedicated to work while managing my personal life and giving my family enough time. ***So how does one do this?***

First, remember, you don't have to be bad at work to be a good parent, and you don't have to be a bad parent to be good at work! You can absolutely be good at both. Also, this doesn't just apply to parenting. It could be anything in your life—a relationship, a hobby, or anything that's important to you.

There are only so many hours in the day, so you need to make every moment count. Always focus on being efficient and effective with your time and actions. What I try to do is plan my day and prioritize tasks at work so that I can leave work each day in time to get home and spend dedicated time with our daughter before she goes to bed. Because this is only a few hours each day, I have also committed to making that time just for her. I'm not on e-mail, doing household chores, or running errands. I can return to those things later in the evening when she is in bed if I need to. ***So how do you do this? There is no easy answer, and I am far from an expert, but here are a few things I've tried that have worked:***

- Take advantage of modern conveniences and technology like online shopping. (I don't know how I survived before Amazon prime!)
- Get organized. Make lists electronically and share them with others they apply to. Then, remember to delegate. Leaders in every field talk about delegating tasks—apply this to your personal life as well as at work.
- Hire someone to do your household chores that take your valuable time. As an example, I use a cleaning service.
- Plan a menu, use grocery delivery, and prepare meals/ingredients ahead. This is one of my most important steps. Don't feel guilty for sending your children to day care. Think about how they benefit from being there.
- Try to avoid expending energy on trivial issues. Have perspective instead of stressing or stewing over things. If you need to address a situation, figure out a plan and address it. Otherwise, let it go.
- Schedule time for yourself; don't forget this. It helps to keep you sane.
- Follow the 1-minute rule. If it takes less than 1 minute to do something, just do it when it comes up and don't put it off.

Finally, remember, you can't force a timeline. We all have an idea in our heads of when things should happen in our lives and professional careers, but this is only a starting point. Life will throw you curves, and you need to adapt to them. Keep an open mind and lean on others around you. I didn't invent any of these ideas on my own. Like pharmacy students and residents observing numerous pharmacists to develop their own practice, I have learned these things from talking to lots of people and implementing what works for me. Continue

to evaluate your focus on work and life and make sure you are putting the right amount of time into each to achieve your goals. If you aren't where you want to be in either your life or your career, don't feel like you can't get there. You aren't limited to getting all of this done in a certain way or during a certain window of time. Think about what is lacking and how you can focus on one or the other—or both—to achieve success and satisfaction.

Balance is baloney, so focus on what makes sense at each point in your life and you can have both a job and a life that you love. Life is short; make the most of it!

Sincerely,

Jenny