

The balanced researcher

Strategies for busy researchers

If you're a busy researcher juggling many demands on your time then you need to read this book. It will give you:

Strategies to be more effective in your work

Strategies to balance work and other parts of your life

Specific actions that will have a big impact on your work and life



contents

page

- 2** The balanced researcher?
- 3** The secret life of a researcher
- 4-5** How's your balance?
- 6-9** Ten strategies for keeping your work in balance
 - 1. Make a plan
 - 2. Pick the right things
 - 3. Make time for research
 - 4. Learn how to say NO
 - 5. Delegate
 - 6. Set realistic standards
 - 7. Write regularly (and then submit it!)
 - 8. Don't check your email first thing in the morning
 - 9. Use the 3 Ds of paperwork (and email)
 - 10. Deal with distractions
- 10-13** Ten strategies to keep the non-work part of your life in balance
 - 1. Establish boundaries between work and non-work
 - 2. Get a routine
 - 3. Ask your significant others
 - 4. Be present
 - 5. Book breaks and holidays
 - 6. Delegate, outsource, get help
 - 7. Exercise, diet and health
 - 8. Me time
 - 9. Review your priorities
 - 10. Have fun!
- 15** Putting it into practice

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The balanced researcher?

So you're a researcher. Chances are then, you're pretty busy. Firstly, there's your research. Proposals. Ethics. Paperwork. Meetings. Applying for grants. Getting grants, then managing the money and the people. Writing reports. And that's all before you even get to the actual research. Then there's papers to write, rejection letters to deal with and conferences to attend.

And for most people research is just one of the things they do. You might teach or tutor, run demonstrations, manage a unit or even have another completely different job. And that's just work. No matter how much you enjoy your research it's likely that there are other parts to your life too. You probably have a family or friends, you may have social commitments and, who knows, you may even have some personal interests!

It can be hard to fit all of this in. There are so many demands on your time, so much to do. So, is it possible to have some sort of balance or is this just the way it is if you want to be an effective researcher?

The good news

The good news is that it is possible to keep a sense of balance and be an effective researcher. Over the past ten years we've run very successful workshops for thousands of researchers ranging from post-graduate researchers to post-docs and very senior researchers. We talk about what works and what doesn't in terms of being a successful researcher and also how to have a life outside of research. In this book we summarise the most useful strategies and provide a range of suggestions that we and other researchers have found useful in balancing the different demands in our lives.

This book is a chance for you to think about balance in your life, what you might want to change, and strategies for doing that. But first a story. Does the following situation sound familiar?

The secret life of a researcher



You get in early at **8.00am** because you want to finish that paper that's been hanging around for ages. You're sitting at your desk ready to start writing. You think – I'll just check my emails for ten minutes and then I'll get started on the literature review. There's one from your co-author asking if your draft is ready. A quick shudder and on to the next one. An honours student in your department saying they can't find a particular reference. You think – What a pain, why can't they look it up themselves; but it'll only take a few minutes, I'll just do a quick check on the library electronic journals. Eventually, with great satisfaction, it's found and emailed off. A few more emails.



It's **9.15am**. Well, you think, I may as well just get the rest of these emails cleared; *glassware not cleaned in lab yesterday – send back saying it wasn't me; astronomical society bash tonight – send back saying sorry, can't come; interesting reference from colleague – reply saying thanks, and go look up reference – feel very satisfied when found, printed, stapled and put in pile with 40 other articles.*



It's **10.00am**. Where has the morning gone? Well, it's been pretty busy; surely it's time for a cup of coffee. You meet a few colleagues in the coffee room and talk about how hard it is to find time to fit research in. It's **10.30am**. As it's only an hour until the team meeting you think there's not much point in trying to start the lit review now, so you polish up some material for your afternoon seminar. The team meeting goes on and on. Eventually it's **12.30pm** and with a sigh of relief you head off for lunch.



At **1.30pm** you get back but now you've got that post-lunch drowsiness so you think – first I'll just do a few of those quick jobs that have been hanging around to get me into the mood. It's **2.30pm** and a colleague knocks on the door and asks for help calibrating her sensometer. You're really good at this so you help, and after all, she's helped you with your statistics in the past. Then you have to give a lecture/seminar and the participants keep asking questions afterwards. After this you rush back into your office.



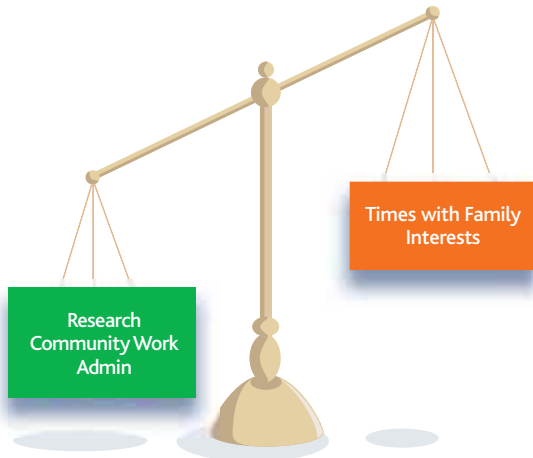
It's **4.30pm** already. You're late so you shut down your computer, grab your bag and rush out. Your department head walks past and asks how your day was. You say – great, very busy, did a lot – but you have to rush now because you're late for a meeting of the Department Research Committee and they're discussing improving publication outcomes!

Eventually you get home. Late as usual. Tired after a busy day. Family things to do. Bills to pay. Calls to return. And all the while carrying a black cloud of guilt because that paper still has to be written. Definitely going to get to it tomorrow!

How's your balance?

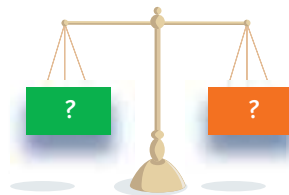
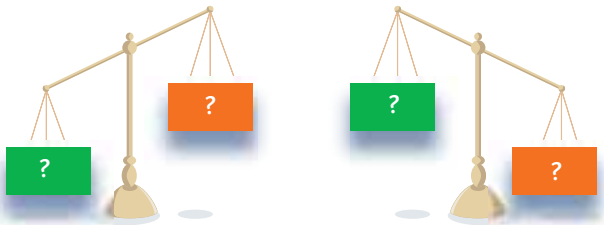
OK, so that story might not be you. Then again, we have lots of people come up to us at workshops and ask if we've been spying on them! So how is your balance?

The balance scale on the right is a visual way of looking at balance.



> **Try out a few balance scales for yourself. Where would you place the following items on your balance scale?**

- Work
- Home
- Administration
- Work you want to do
- Work you have to do
- Teaching
- Research
- Health
- Career progression
- External demands
- Me time
- Family/friends



Here are some signs of imbalance:

- *increased stress*
- *worry and frustration*
- *fatigue and health problems*
- *loss of interests and motivation*
- *isolation*

What would those who know you say?

A note about balance. Many people imagine balance as a fixed state where everything is in perfect equilibrium. A better image of balance is of a tightrope walker who is in a constant state of slight imbalance but can make small adjustments to accommodate. That's what life is like. There are always unexpected emergencies and opportunities that can knock you out of balance. The trick is how quickly you can resume your balance.

- > **Have you got the balance the way you want?**
- > **What would you change?**
- > **What would your ideal look like?**

We worked with one woman who was on an international post-doc. She worked hard in the lab all day. When she went home she looked after her family. Because English was her second language she attended a class to help with her written English. She was exhausted. When we asked what she would like to do she said she'd love to be able to spend an hour a week doing yoga but couldn't see how to fit it in. With a little re-organisation and re-prioritising she was able to find the hour. And just that one thing made a huge difference to how she felt.



Effective strategies for achieving balance?



What we've done in this book is take the most effective strategies around work-life balance, time management and effectiveness, and express them in a short, practical form that you can put into practice. First we describe ten strategies that can help you be more effective in your work and get a sense of balance in your research role. Then we describe ten strategies that apply to your non-research life.

Ten strategies for keeping your work in balance

1 Make a plan

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where--' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Planning isn't that exciting and when you're feeling overwhelmed, it's probably the last thing you feel like doing or can find time to do. However if you don't give some thought to what you want to achieve, you are likely to be tossed around by circumstance, and become fairly reactive in your choices.

One of the reasons people give for not planning is that things change and often plans don't work out. Eisenhower's quote suggests that plans need to be fluid. Then you can change and update them as circumstances change.

'Plans are useless but planning is essential.'

US President Dwight Eisenhower

So if you look ahead to the next year what are your plans? What would you really like to achieve by the end of the year? By the end of three months? By the end of this week? By the end of today? What is the most important thing you need to get done today?

2 Pick the right things

A pilot announced to her passengers 'I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that we're 500km ahead of schedule. The bad news is that we're travelling in completely the wrong direction.'



It's more important to be doing the right things than doing things right. Sometimes we make the assumption that working hard is enough. But experience tells us that this is not so. For example, spending weeks marking assignments will not get your thesis written. A massive teaching load is not going to help your research career. Sure, these are valuable activities, but you need to think about which tasks and projects deserve the most attention.

So look at the tasks on your list. Are they the right things? Of course some things will be out of your control, but not everything. Are there things on your list that are taking up time but are not really helpful?

A senior researcher told us how busy she was. She had moved from one institution to another but several months later was still involved in many projects from her former institution. They weren't making much effort to replace her so she was still doing some of that work. This was a clear case of working hard but at the wrong things.

3 Make time for research

Research may be only one part of your role. You might also be a lecturer or a supervisor or have another job. What often happens then is that research gets squeezed in at the end when all the other, seemingly more urgent, things are done. You spend the day doing administration, attending meetings, responding to students and keep telling yourself that you must get down to your research when you find time. Unfortunately when you do find it, it's usually at the end of the day or late at night when your brain cells are not that creative.

What you have to do is **MAKE** time. This means setting aside specific time (in your diary!) when you will research or write.



In our experience, the most effective time for doing the demanding aspects of research, such as writing or analysis, seems to be early in the day when you're fresh. We suggest setting aside two hours, say between 9 and 11am, that you dedicate to writing or analysis.

4 Learn how to say NO

There's a song "Sorry seems to be the hardest word". However for most people NO seems to be a harder word! It's so easy to commit to things, to take on an extra project, to keep loading yourself up. Eventually you end up overloaded!

For most of us saying NO is not easy. But there are some alternatives. A good one is to learn how not to say YES so readily. When someone asks you to take on a new commitment you might answer "*That sounds interesting. Can I get back to you?*" or "*I'll just need to check my diary and I'll give you a call back*". This gives you time to think about whether you really want to take on the task or to come up with some alternatives. For example "*I can't help you with that right now but if you can wait until tomorrow I'll have some time then*".

5 Delegate

Some people get overwhelmed because they feel they have to do everything themselves. Now in every job there are some things that you personally have to do, but in most jobs there are also parts you can get help with. You might be lucky enough to have staff you can delegate tasks to. If not, there may be others who can provide assistance eg students, administrative staff. Is there money available to pay someone to help?

There are several reasons why people are reluctant to delegate.

It's faster to do it myself.

Perhaps the first few times but long term you'll be overloaded

The other person won't do it as well as I can.

Possibly. But will they do it to a sufficient standard?

I like doing it.

Sure, but you've got so many other things to do too.

What could you delegate?

Ten strategies for keeping your work in balance

6 Set realistic standards

One researcher we worked with told us she had five articles that could be sent to journals but she couldn't send them. She felt that they weren't good enough, that they needed more work. That they were sure to be rejected. This was despite previous evidence to the contrary. Her strategy was to start working on the sixth paper!

In our experience researchers and research students tend to be intelligent, high achieving people. They also often tend to be perfectionistic, setting very high standards for themselves. This has pluses and minuses. The pluses are that they produce high quality work and strive to do good research. The minuses are that the high standards can get in the way of producing good work. Perfectionists can be very critical of their own work leading to a lot of self-doubt and concerns about their ability.

Perfectionists, by definition, find it hard to set reasonable standards. So one strategy is to look at the objective evidence? What have you achieved? What has been the reaction to your work so far? Get an objective opinion from someone else.



> How are your standards?

7 Write regularly (and then submit it!)

In our experience many researchers find writing difficult. It's not that they dislike writing. Many enjoy it. But firstly it's hard to find the time and then there are the anxieties that it raises.

Is what I've written good enough? Will it be rejected? Even when they write, many hesitate before submitting. They think I need to go over it one more time. I need to polish it up a bit.

Some writers also suffer from binge writing. This is based on an assumption that you need big blocks of time (eg three days) to write. The problem is that three free days rarely appear.

So in our experience the most productive researchers write regularly even if it is only in small amounts – research shows that even 30 minute blocks increase writing productivity.



We put one PhD student on a regime of writing for two hours three days a week. He achieved more in six weeks than he had in the previous six months.

8 Don't check your email first thing in the morning



You can increase your daily productivity by about 20% by following this one simple tip. When most of us get to work our first inclination is to just quickly check our emails. But mostly it doesn't turn out to be quick. And then you end up getting distracted and becoming reactive.

So try this. When you get in to work don't turn on your computer (or at least your email program). Instead you might plan out your day's work and if possible even start on the most important thing. Then you can check your email, say after morning tea. Give it a try!

9 Use the 3 Ds of paperwork (and email)

Research involves a lot of paperwork. Journals to read, forms to fill out, requests for information and so on. It's likely your desk is piled high. Some people cope fine with clutter but for others it leads to a lot of stress and lost productivity. Try this strategy for dealing with paperwork (and emails). The next time you pick up a piece of paper imagine that it is stuck to your fingers. The only way to get it off your fingers is one of the 3 Ds.

1. Do it if you can do it straight away then do it and get rid of it.

2. Dairise it if it will take more than a few minutes to do then get out your diary and find the time when you will do it. Then put the paper in the file for that project.

3. Ditch it if you don't want to do it or diarise it then ditch it. Yes! In the bin.

Deal with distractions

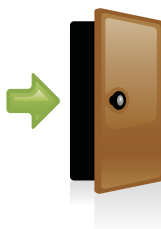
Constant distractions such as phone calls, emails or drop-in visitors can lead to feeling a bit out of control. You have plans but they keep getting waylaid. But there are some things you can do:

- Don't answer your phone at certain times. Let it go to the answering machine when you are trying to concentrate or writing



One professor we worked with arranged for the computer support staff to remove the Solitaire program from his computer.

- Turn off the 'bing' on your email program so it doesn't pop up and distract you. Even better, turn off your email program
- Set up consultation times for meetings and student consultations
- Close your office door if you have one
- Go to a quiet place if you need to do concentrated work



Ten strategies for keeping the non-work part of your life in balance

1 Establish boundaries between work and non-work

It's easy for work to spill over from your normal work day into the rest of your life. If you don't get things done during the day it's tempting to tell yourself that you can finish it off at home later. The internet has made this much easier. You can check your emails from home, search for references and resources and be in contact with anyone at any time.

The problem with this is that you might start off just finishing off some urgent task but this then grows into responding to emails, trying to get ahead for the next day. Often because it's quieter at home you actually get more done. This can lead to a blurring of when you are working and when you're not.

And it's good to be off duty sometimes. That's when you recharge, catch up with family and friends and attend to the other parts of your life. So while there are no definitive rules it's useful to think about where the balance is for you. Clear boundaries can be helpful. For example, you might decide not to work at home at all. Or if you do work at home you might specify certain times.

A senior academic described her boundaries. She decided to work hard during the week but wherever possible not to work on the weekends. She didn't check her work emails, she switched off her work mobile and didn't bring paperwork home with her. She reported that her weekends were much more fun but that she was also being more effective at work. She said "In the past I used to procrastinate about things because I knew I'd do them on the weekend. Now I focus on finishing things when I'm at work because I know I'm not going to work on the weekend. It's helped me focus on the important things."



Get a routine

Routines can be a useful way of ensuring you get round to things that are important to you. For example, you could set one night of the week when you go out with your friends or family. If you leave this to chance, or when you find time, it's less likely to happen.

One person we worked with instituted Friday Surprise with his young family. This meant that every Friday evening after work he got to decide what the family would do eg go to the movies, have a meal. By having the routine people didn't double-book on Friday and the fact that it was a family routine meant that it was very likely to happen. The surprise element also made it fun.



Do you have routines that have fallen into disuse? Is it worth getting one going again?

3 Ask your significant others before taking on major commitments

Often we take on major commitments, that impact on our family and friends, without really thinking about what it means for them. So when someone suggests that you apply for a new grant that will take a lot of your time you might mention it to the people close to you. They might comment "But you said you were overworked already. How are you going to fit this in?" One researcher we know took this to such extremes that people used to ring his partner first to ask if he was available for new commitments.



A general practitioner on one of our courses recalled that his spouse told him "Your work gets the best, your family gets the rest". It's interesting to think that many of us give our best to people we don't know very well and the people we do care about see us when we're tired and worn out.

4 Be present

Sometimes although your body has left work your mind is still on the job. Presenteeism, as opposed to absenteeism, is where you are physically there but your attention is somewhere else. You know the feeling. You're there playing scrabble with your kids and they ask you a question and you've no idea what they said because your mind was back at work.

You might be worrying about something you left unfinished or thinking about what's in store for tomorrow. We sometimes tell ourselves that this going over of things in our heads, worrying, is useful because we might find a solution.

There are some strategies for reducing worry. If there is something you really need to do, then do it eg call someone to check if there really is a problem. Write down your worries. Debrief with someone. Distract yourself.



Problem-solving versus worrying

It's important to distinguish between problem-solving and worry. Problem-solving is a fairly structured process of working out what can be done. Worrying is recycling the same thoughts over and over. It's a pretty destructive activity because not only does it not solve the problem, it wears out your neurons.

Ten strategies for keeping the non-work part of your life in balance

5 Book breaks and holidays

Often we tell ourselves we must have a break when we find the time. But then the time doesn't come. An alternative is to schedule breaks and holidays well in advance. The break itself is good but looking forward to it can also be motivating. Even short breaks are helpful. They can help you get perspective on issues and often you return to work feeling more productive.

Bringing paperwork on holidays

Your paperwork and your laptop need a holiday too. But the best holiday you can give them is to leave them at home while you're away. One early career researcher described how she would feel guilty about taking a holiday so she always brought her data with her so she could analyse it. Of course she never looked at it which made her feel guilty too.



6 Delegate, outsource, get help

Some of us, high achievers and perfectionists in particular, are very reluctant to give up anything. We think we should be able to do it all. We want to perform well at work, then come home and organise a house and garden, and spend time with family and friends.

The reality is that there is limited time (168 hours in a week), and heavy commitments in one area of life mean there is less time in other areas. It's sensible to get help where you can. For example, perhaps you can afford to pay a cleaner to come in once a week, get a gardener, use a babysitter occasionally.

7 Exercise, diet and health

When things are out of balance it's likely that the last thing you want to do is exercise or examine your health and diet. Yet these things build up your resilience and give you more energy. It's tempting, when you're under pressure from looming deadlines, to work late into the night and sleep less. This might work in the short term but it becomes counter-productive. You can end up putting in more hours but getting less output.

Once again, looking after yourself works better if you have a routine.



We worked with one researcher who had a history of health problems. His life seemed to go in a cycle of feeling OK for a while, and then having a serious illness where he couldn't work. His solution was to work very hard when he was able to. In fact he would work so hard he wouldn't get much sleep or exercise or eat very well. And of course then he would get sick and not be able to work at all. Which only made him more determined to work even harder the next time so he could catch up.

> What small changes could you make on a consistent basis?

8 Me time

One woman came to our workshop because she was stuck. She wanted to do her research but couldn't seem to find the time or energy. It turned out she had a great interest in gardening but hadn't had time to do any for ages. When she did make some time for it, she felt much more positive and also more motivated to have a go at her research.



What do you really enjoy doing? Did you have a passion when you were a child, for example, singing, painting? Do you have some great interest or hobby? Our interests often get squeezed out when work pressure and other demands increase. Which is a shame for two reasons. Firstly, you are missing out on something you enjoy. And secondly these activities restore you and are likely to make you more motivated and productive.



> **What would you do if you had some "me time"?**

9 Review your priorities

Sometimes it's easy to drift into things or get carried along by peers and colleagues. Because everyone else has the latest labour-saving gadget you get one. And then you have to work harder to pay for it. And it doesn't seem to save you much labour!

We work with rural doctors and many of them work really long hours so that they can provide well for their family. But they work so hard that they don't get to spend time with their families. And when you ask the families what they really want they say "To spend more time with Mum or Dad".

> **Does your life reflect your priorities?**

“Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans”

John Lennon

10 Have fun!

It's tempting to think you'll be happy when you finish this project, when the house is finished, when the next paper gets published, when your thesis is finished, when things settle down. That might happen but there's no reason why you can't have some fun now too!



> **What are the things you enjoy? Can you do one of them now?**

Making changes

You might think all this is just common sense really. (It is!) But then why don't we do it? One reason is that over a lifetime we develop habits or patterns of behaviour and some of these are hard to break. And secondly, we sometimes lose a bit of perspective. When you're in the middle of something, eg writing a paper, it can seem like the most important thing in the world. When we're busy, our thinking can get a bit muddled. So here are some tips that we have used with people to increase the chances of making changes and then making the changes stick.

> Choose something small and achievable

Rather than signing up for the next Ironwoman competition or an Everest ascent, you might decide to go for a walk at lunchtime three times a week. Setting achievable goals and achieving them is likely to motivate you to keep at it and will probably lead to more changes.

What is your small and achievable thing?

> Choose something you can do soon

The sooner the better, ideally in the next few days. For example, call a colleague today to discuss that book chapter that's been hanging over your head. Or tomorrow hand in that draft of a chapter you've been hanging onto for weeks.

When can you start it? Today?

> Commit to the change

This means doing something like writing it in your diary, telling people about it or arranging to involve other people. For example, tell your kids that you will pick them up early after school and walk home with them tomorrow. Or join a knitting group or a book group.

Who can you tell?

> Reward yourself

If you make a change that was difficult, eg saying no to an opportunity, or finishing off a piece of work that has been hanging over your head, then give yourself a reward. The reward might be having a cup of tea or taking a break or even checking your emails! But remember that the reward must come AFTER the task, not before!

What's your reward?

Here are some examples of changes that people have made. Most of them are small but have had a big impact...

- ✓ Stop checking emails first thing in the morning
- ✓ Block out two hours in the morning for writing
- ✓ Use a diary for scheduling work
- ✓ Go for a walk at lunchtime
- ✓ Decide not to stand for a committee at the next AGM
- ✓ Have lunch!
- ✓ Take a weekend break with my partner (and not bring work!)

So what can you do? Can you do something about it right now e.g. write it in your diary, call someone, book a meal out?

Putting it into practice

This short book is an opportunity to think about the current balance in your work and your life and how you might like things to be. It provides a range of practical strategies and suggestions that many researchers have used to make small but significant changes.



Balance at work

- 1 Make a plan
- 2 Pick the right things
- 3 Make time for research
- 4 Learn how to say NO
- 5 Delegate
- 6 Set realistic standards
- 7 Write regularly (and then submit it!)
- 8 Don't check your email first thing in the morning
- 9 Use the 3 Ds of paperwork (and email)
- 10 Deal with distractions



Balance in your non-work life

- 1 Establish boundaries between work and non-work
- 2 Get a routine
- 3 Ask your significant others
- 4 Be present
- 5 Book breaks and holidays
- 6 Delegate, outsource, get help
- 7 Exercise, diet and health
- 8 Me time
- 9 Review your priorities
- 10 Have fun!

So what will work for you?

If life is going along fine, then keep on doing what you are doing. If you feel a bit out of balance, or want to make some changes, then perhaps it's worth giving one of these strategies a go.

About the authors

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Together they have a long history of working with high performing people to increase their effectiveness and self-management skills. They have run numerous workshops and masterclasses for academics, researchers and PhD students and are in high demand across Australia and internationally. In 2006 they were honoured with a national teaching award for their innovative programs dealing with the emotional and psychological aspects of doctoral study.

They are active researchers themselves having published many papers and authored a number of very popular books aimed at PhD students and researchers.

- **Defeating self-sabotage: getting your thesis finished**
- **The seven secrets of highly successful PhD students**
- **The PhD experience: what they didn't tell you at induction**
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