

A Life Coach's Guide to Getting the Career Balance You Want

By Dr. Sara Dill, Dermatologist and Certified Life Coach



What is work-life balance? Do you have it? What's your reaction when you hear that term? For so many physicians, including us dermatologists, there are very strong and often-negative reactions to the phrase "work-life balance."

What if defining work-life balance is actually pretty simple? I like to define work-life balance as simply creating a healthy balance between your working life and your personal life. Notice I said creating and not having or finding. Work-life balance doesn't just HAPPEN to us. We don't just FIND it one day. Right? What happens to us typically is the opposite: our work life takes over and our personal life shrinks to almost nothing. I first experienced encroachment of my work life into my personal life in medical school and then it continued in residency and in my first few years of work as an attending. Add in other personal responsibilities like children, family, community, etcetera to the mix, and it is no wonder work-life balance seems to recede like a desert mirage, seemingly always out of reach. So while work-life balance might be simple to define, it is not easy to create.

As both a practicing dermatologist and a physician life coach, I deal with balancing personal and professional identities a lot. I get asked a lot of questions and coach on this topic all the time. Some questions I hear are:

How can I have work-life balance?

Is it even possible for today's overworked physicians to try to have better work-life balance? Or is that just asking for disappointment?

**Can you be a successful physician and take care of patients well and not work more than you want to?
How?**

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My answer to all of these questions is creating a work-life balance is completely possible; however, figuring out how to reach that balance is entirely up to you.

The reason that figuring out how to create work-life balance is up to each individual is because ideal work-life balance is different for different people and it changes at different phases of every person's life. It is nuanced. It is not simply an even split between the hours you spend at or on work and the hours you spend on your personal life. It requires each of us to discover what a healthy, sustainable and enjoyable life looks like for ourselves. It is something I continue to work on and fine-tune for myself all the time. That is why I actually prefer the term "life balance" – meaning finding an integration between all areas of your life that is sustainable and enjoyable (including work). It's not a balance of hours or time or energy – it is an integration, an interplay, a dance. Less hamster wheel and more Peloton. (Which, as an aside, is actually a human hamster wheel in many ways, and one I gladly enjoy myself).

So, getting back to the how:

How can you start to create a better work-life balance or life balance for yourself?

As a coach, I always start with understanding what beliefs a physician has about their work, their life, and their ability to create a better work-life balance for themselves. Whatever you currently believe about work-life balance is going to show up in how your life looks right now.

Our thoughts create our results. Not in some woo-woo way, but in a very concrete way. For example, if you believe that as a physician, you have to work 5 days a week to be successful, guess what? You will work 5 days a week. Or if you believe that a good doctor is one who is always available for his or her patients, guess what? You will always be available. Or feel guilty or like a bad doctor when you take time for yourself and then end up spending half your "free time" thinking about work.

How do you think your life would look different if you believed that having a lot of time off work made you a better and more successful dermatologist? What if you asked yourself questions like "how can I work less and earn more?" Or "if I knew it was possible to have a thriving dermatology career no matter what, how much would I like to work and what would that look like?" Start to dream and scheme. Start to tap into what your ideal work-life balance would look like? Right now. With whatever else is going on in your life, what would need to change for you to achieve your ideal balance balance?

Typically, we physicians need to learn how to say no to others, so we can say yes to ourselves. A yes to anything means we are saying no to something else. Right now, are you more willing to disappoint yourself or other people? My life really changed when I started being willing to disappoint others rather than disappoint myself.

You can also start to notice where you are taking on over-responsibility by making yourself accountable for other people's choices, lives, and outcomes. Taking on responsibility for things outside of one's actual control is one of the most common things I see in physicians – making ourselves responsible for so much that is outside our actual control. Stop it and start focusing more on your choices, your life, your outcomes!

I encourage physicians to approach creating life balance by putting your personal life on the calendar, even before work stuff. Block out time with family, free time, workout time, vacations (or staycations), happy hours (virtual or not). Whatever is important to you, put it on the calendar! Make sure you prioritize you. Then honor your calendar. Commit to it. Notice what works and what doesn't.

**This is not a once and done thing – this is a practice. It is a learnable skill.
I promise. It is something I continue to work on and fine-tune for myself all the time.**

As dermatologists, we are expert problem-solvers. We are amazing at recognizing patterns, thinking creatively, trying new things when the tried-and-true approaches aren't working. Can you bring the determination and creativity you employ taking care of your patients to taking care of your own life: both work and personal? I want to see dermatologists set the new standard for how to be a successful physician and have a healthy and sustainable work-life balance. Let's figure it out and share it with our colleagues. Let's be an example to our patients as well. Other people's work-life balance will look different than ours. But I truly believe it is not only possible, but required. Failure to create a sustainable dermatology career as part of a fulfilling life leads to burnout, to poor patient care, to an exodus of physicians when more are needed, to mental health struggles, and even suicide.

The importance of this is emphasized by the inclusion of this line in the new Hippocratic Oath: "I will attend to my own health, well-being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard." Are you attending to your own health, well-being, and abilities?? If not, start with why? What is preventing you? Write those thoughts down. Start to question them. What would be too good to be true?

Start creating THAT work-life balance. The too-good-to-be-true one.

Sara Dill is a board-certified dermatologist and pediatric dermatologist in Southern California. She is also a certified life coach through The Life Coach School and coaches physicians on work-life balance, stress reduction, and how to how to enjoy work and life more. She is available to contact by email at sara@saradill.com or at her website saradill.com. She welcomes any questions or comments.