

Having trouble achieving work-life balance? Knowing your strategies is key

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Essays are being written, final exams are looming and classes are reaching their busy conclusion. With conflicting demands from work, home and the classroom, this hectic time of year can be filled with stress. But according to new research from the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC), a little self-reflection could do us all a world of good.

"People need to ask themselves, 'What roles do I play?' and 'Are these roles working for me?'" says Julie McCarthy, associate professor of organizational behaviour at UTSC. "And if they're not working, we then need to ask, 'What are the strategies I'm using to make things better?'"

In her latest study, the UTSC associate professor of [organizational behavior](#) worked with Tracy Hecht of Concordia University to look at how undergraduate students attempted to achieve balance. All of the participants were UTSC students with jobs outside of school.

McCarthy and Hecht looked at three strategies often used to deal with opposing demands on time, attention and energy: solution-driven active engagement (problem-focused), venting to others (emotion-focused) or ignoring those problems altogether and distracting ourselves with other activities (avoidance-focused).

While the problem-focused approach is traditionally viewed as the best of the three, McCarthy and Hecht's research found that strategy could actually cause more problems as a result of stress, over-exhaustion and

lack of recovery time. "People need time to refocus in order to learn or study well," says McCarthy.

The most surprising conclusion had to do with the third coping mechanism: avoidance. When the student participants simply set aside some of their issues for a while, they actually experienced a reduction in conflict between life roles. "This technique is traditionally seen as 'running away from your problems'," says McCarthy. "But maybe by backing off and taking breaks, students are able to replenish their resources."

Feeling drained leads to lower levels of satisfaction with life and higher rates of burnout, depression and ill-health. And while playing multiple roles can be stimulating, interesting and lead to sense of accomplishment and achievement, McCarthy says there are real risks we need to be aware of. "People need to assess which strategies they're using to cope with their problems and make sure they're making time for resource recovery," she says. "Too many roles can be detrimental unless we begin asking ourselves honest, pointed questions."

Provided by University of Toronto

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