



# Work-Life Balance for Nurses

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(Really)

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A teenager may have trouble with working four hours a week because it interferes with her social time. At this stage in her life she is focused on self-care; she spends hours in front of the mirror, sleeps late and takes naps, and can't possibly miss a minute of hanging out with her friends. Dinner at the family table is a chore in the busy life of the self-absorbed teen.

Then that teenager goes to nursing school. There she learns that she has to forgo some of the parties to do homework, and even goes to bed early to avoid falling asleep in clinical. During those nursing school years she starts to become socialized to the role of a nurse and hears countless stories about "really good nurses" who put their patients, their employers, and virtually everyone else first in their lives.

Having graduated nursing school our teenager is now in her early twenties and takes on the new job with enthusiasm – she is finally going to get a chance to help people! She learns early on that her value to her boss is directly proportional to the number of shifts she picks up; and her value to her peers is directly proportional to the amount of work she does. She is told that no one wants to pick up after her every day.

Years pass and our nurse takes on more and more responsibilities in her life. She has several great role models at work – those people who "do it all." As a nurse, as a caregiver, and now as a wife and mother, our nurse is the glue that holds it all together. Unfortunately, *she* is starting to come apart!

Since beginning this job she has gained 32 pounds, has not exercised in years, gave up her beloved painting hobby, and rarely sees her friends anymore. She is often depressed and wants desperately to find the joy she had when she was younger. Why can't she just find a balance between work and home and a little time for herself?

Nurses have difficulty with work-life balance because nurses are socialized to a caretaking role. And even though much has changed in the nursing field there is still an underlying current of the "calling" mentality that asks nurses to exceed their comfort zones for the good of their employer. Outside of work, nurses take the caretaking role into their other relationships too, often taking on much more responsibility at home and in the community than they are realistically able.

In virtually every hospital, and on virtually every floor, is the classic martyr. She is the one who takes the hardest assignment without complaining, volunteers to stay long after her shift is over, and picks up every available extra shift. It is obvious that she puts everyone else's priorities before hers, but of course she is not happy. She really doesn't want to work that hard but is desperately afraid that if she doesn't that she won't *be* enough. Martyrs are victims; and victims are not happy.

Another habit that many nurses pick up is that of being very busy. These nurses confuse busyness with being productive. This person is very busy doing things that are not very important and they achieve very little. There are very few things in life that are *really* important. Getting in touch with what's most

important to you is essential to feeling in balance. In order to avoid being simply busy, every nurse ought to ask themselves if this activity will help them to reach their goals. If not, than simply say “no.”

***"We need to maintain a proper balance in our life by allocating the time we have. There are occasions where saying no is the best time management practice there is." ~Catherine Pulsifer, from We Never Seem to Have Enough Time***

### **What??? No goals???**

You're kidding, right? Unfortunately most nurses don't have clearly written goals of what they want to accomplish. So, let me ask you one question: “how do you expect to hit a target you can't see?” Most people want to be reasonably happy, successful, and prosperous. Yet most nurses don't have goals. Hmm, maybe it is time to try the lottery, because your chances of being happy, successful and prosperous are less than your chances of winning the lottery – if you don't have goals.

Write down 20 goals right now that you want to achieve in the next month, six months, one year, and five years. Look at your list every day – whether your day is going well or not, it is important to see your goals every day. Always ask yourself if what you are doing is bringing you closer to (or further away from) your goals.

### **Mentors for work-life balance**

Dr. Steven Covey says that we need to “sharpen the saw” to be most effective. The analogy refers to the fact that a sharp saw will cut better and more efficiently than a dull saw. The saw represents your abilities and your talents. How sharp is your saw? If you are stressed and irritable how effective are you with your patients, your peers, or your family? If you feel like your interpersonal relationships are often grating and rough in nature rather than smooth and refreshing, than your saw is pretty dull.

***"Just as your car runs more smoothly and requires less energy to go faster and farther when the wheels are in perfect alignment, you perform better when your thoughts, feelings, emotions, goals, and values are in balance." ~Brian Tracy***

In the Bible Jesus said “come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:30). Relaxation is important to help you shift gears and access deeper levels of thinking. When you are constantly rushing around at work, after work, and at home, you will have a constant “fight or flight” stress response. The response can be energizing and many nurses take on even more responsibility to continue to get this “high.” But “fight or flight” is not conducive to deep meditative thinking, which is essential to finding your purpose, setting goals, and living in congruence with your purpose and goals.

Even professional athletes have an off-season. This is time to regroup, recover, relax and prepare for next season. Many experts agree that a daily time of reflection is essential to living a stress-free and highly-productive life. Daily reflection helps you to keep in balance.

***"Most of us are trying to balance work, home, and a family life. We tend not to accept the early symptoms of burnout and carry on our daily lives." ~Yasmeen Abdur-Rahman, from Recognize the Early Signs of Burnout***

## Reasons for work-life balance

Stress occurs when demands on you outweigh your resources. The greater the demands on your life, the greater the number of resources you need to balance the stress. Resources can be found in the relationships of friends and family, or in the fellowship of a church group, or in the physical relaxation from exercising. Try some of the stress-busters below to help you balance the stress of the demands of your life.

The unmanaged stress in your life causes physical problems ranging from headaches to cardiovascular disease to memory problems and substance abuse. Unmanaged stress leads to poor job performance, errors, and injuries. More than 70% of nurses cite acute and chronic effects of stress as among their top three health concerns.

***"Balance in your life between work and your personal life is very important. Without balance, you eventually burnout negatively affecting your performance at work."***

***~Byron & Catherine Pulsifer, from What Are the Benefits to Me?***

### Stress-Busters:

- Take a 20-minute walk
- Soak in a warm bath
- Read a chapter in a novel
- Eat a salad
- Call an old friend
- Hug a child
- Practice slow controlled breathing for 30 seconds
- List five things that bring you joy.

Fortunately, there is an answer. And that answer lies within you! You have a mission or a purpose to your life. Maybe you can still remember the excitement you had when you started nursing school – that feeling like you were going to be able to help people and make a difference. And yet, over the years that sentiment has faded away to the point that you chide the new graduate for his naivety. But the mission is still there and if you don't get back on track to completing the mission, you will forever feel like you are missing out on something.

Here's the quick test: when you are helping others and doing something that you thoroughly enjoy, you are probably acting in your mission.

## How a coach can help

If you knew how to get back on track, you wouldn't be reading this. Instead you would be busy acting out your purpose. A coach can help you to clarify what is most important to you and help you to discover how you can reach your goals.

A coach will:

- Help you set larger, better, more rewarding goals, both personal and professional.
- Speak with you weekly to help you strategize and take action.
- Ask more of you than you – or others – might ask of yourself.

To find out more about professional coaching, or to schedule a complimentary 30-minute coaching session, call (800) 990-2538 or visit [www.coaching4nurses.com](http://www.coaching4nurses.com).