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When it comes to work-life balance, my current position as an Extension educator presents some unique challenges. I admit, there are days I am so overwhelmed that hiding under my desk sounds like a valid problem solving strategy.

I really appreciated the tips that Dr. Goldberg shared in the March column – keep organized, say no, defend your personal time, and exercise. While I aspire to get better at all of these things (and have greatly improved in the last few years), the boundaries between my personal and professional lives is blurry at best.

I received very good advice by a retired educator: “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Showing we care, while remaining the scientist, is challenging, and the work does not end at 5 o’clock. Beyond the general tasks of developing programs, writing articles, and answering questions, we participate in community events, learn the names of children and pets, attend weddings, funerals, and brandings, and treat other people’s problems as our own. It’s tough but rewarding work that challenges even the most organized among our ranks. Here are some things I have learned along the way.

Create a schedule that works for you:

My job requires evening and weekend work, and a fair amount of travel, so I can’t reserve evenings and weekends as personal time. It is very hard for me to get any writing or planning done during the day with so many phone calls and visitors. However, I can get a lot of work done in a few uninterrupted hours on an evening or weekend. I rely heavily on this quiet uninterrupted time “after hours” to get projects done that require deeper thinking or more focus. I work well over 40 hours most weeks, but sometimes I sleep in or leave early on a Friday to go play and don’t feel a bit guilty.

Prioritize:

In this line of work, potential projects are endless and often very compelling. I am slowly learning to prioritize where I spend my attention. This requires getting good at saying no. Remember, a “yes” to one thing is a “no” to something else. Before saying “yes” to a project, ask yourself what the resulting “no” will be. Most importantly, practice saying yes to play time!

Find a Mentor and be a Mentor:

We don't work in a vacuum, and none of our challenges or problems are unique. Find colleagues whom you respect and find ways to learn from each other. Seek out opportunities to mentor youth or young adults. When someone else sees you as inspirational, it can do wonders for your self-esteem and help keep you on track. After all, people are looking up to you!

I recently saw one of those cute little memes that said “be the person you needed when you were young.” It occurs to me that this might be one of the very highest callings, mentoring others. More specifically, inspiring and mentoring future problem solvers.

Create a life you enjoy:

A dear friend of mine once pointed out that work-life balance is easy if you like your personal life! I have worked with scientists and educators whose work *is* their life – 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. While I respect and admire their work, it is not a lifestyle that I choose. The world is too full of adventures to spend all my time in the office or the lab. Find things you love to do (besides your job), and seek out people who inspire you.

We all want to know that our work is important and meaningful in the world, and that we are a valuable part of a team. Perhaps this is what drives us to work so hard, and pursue our professional life with such passion, that we need to talk about work-life balance! I am proud to be part of a team of public and private scientists working together to protect our living systems, address important human needs, and make this world a better place for all of humanity. Even if that means some overwhelming days, or late nights at the office.

BIO

Caitlin Price Youngquist is a University of Wyoming Extension Educator who lives in a small town in northwest Wyoming. She is originally from Washington State, where she earned her undergraduate degree in Animal Science and graduate degrees in Soil Science. Graduate school was never in her plans, but encouragement from a mentor (and employment as a research assistant) changed her mind. After earning her master's degree, she was working for a Conservation District as a farm planner when graduate school found her again. The invitation to return to school for a PhD program was too good pass up. Caitlin was not a farm kid, and before going to college had no idea that “agriculture” was a field of study. But it was her work with several outstanding land grant extension faculty that inspired her to be a public scientist in the field of agriculture, and encouragement from a mentor that set her on a path to Extension work

She is working to create a life she enjoys in rural Wyoming, even if it's hard to get good sushi and the nearest airport is 90 miles away. Caitlin can be found on twitter @dr_cait_lin and online at www.drcaitlin.us.