



living in **BALANCE**

by Kari Culhane

If you've ever walked on a balance beam, you know the powerful yet opposing sensations of fear, stress and excitement that you feel as you move across the narrow beam, delicately placing one foot in front of the other. Acknowledging that these opposing forces can work together helps to create the balance you need to complete this task. If you think too much about falling, you might. If you are overconfident, you may misstep. This delicate walk is not unlike your everyday life where being 'in balance' requires an equal share of a variety of emotions: fear, love, anger, stress, happiness, frustration, calm. If any one part of your life begins to overwhelm the rest, your balance is compromised. Being in balance helps you successfully navigate through life, maintaining a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem.

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Start Fresh

It's not hard to fall out of balance, and all it takes, really, is just one aspect of your life to overwhelm the rest. "With all of the demands of the day-to-day, the act of living has become something you have to concentrate on," says Karen Marans, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist and clinical neuropsychologist at the Domar Center for Mind-Body Health in Waltham, Mass. Maybe the recent economic climate has left you worried or disappointed. Perhaps you're caring for small children and aging parents. Suddenly, you've unknowingly cut down on your weekly workouts, you're not getting enough sleep, you're eating poorly and you've fallen out of touch with what is important to you. According to Marans, the act of living your day-to-day life has become harder, and people need self nurturing every day. To restore your balance, you first need to take a look at your whole self: the physical, emotional and spiritual.

You're Stronger Than You Think

When we feel stress, our bodies quickly release hormones, like adrenaline, into our bloodstream that increase our heart rate, focus our attention and help us prepare for the coming challenge. In the right amount, stress can be motivating. According to the National Institutes of Health, stress was—and still is—crucial to our survival. However, managing stress and your reaction to it is essential. It's important to listen to your body. It will tell you, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, when things are out of synch and it can also tell you what it needs to replenish. Take a step back and rediscover yourself: your passions, your strengths and your values. You're stronger than you think. "All it takes is small acts; doing something for yourself, or sitting back and taking a deep breath," says Marans. "Once you start doing the small things, you will have the flexibility to start doing the larger things." Try these steps below to even out your stress level.

- Keep a daily journal.
- Practice deep breathing.
- Establish a home practice of meditation or yoga.
- Chant a self-affirming mantra, such as 'Stay strong' throughout your day.



Eat To Live

Developing eating habits for lifelong health can help give your body the fuel it needs to feel energized and stay focused. Giving your body the nutrients it needs will help open pathways for clear thinking and decision making. If you often put yourself last and rely on routines to give yourself what you need, below are some new ideas to consider at your next meal.

- Practice mindful eating: leave the table not stuffed, but satisfied. Chew your food slowly and think about how you are helping your body stay strong. Pay close attention to what you eat and to what you feel with all your senses as you nourish yourself.
- Try to eat fresh, local foods whenever possible: Foods that are frozen, canned or refined have, in many cases, stripped the food of its nutritive value.
- Try variety: Each week, try at least a few new foods or fix favorites in new ways so that your taste buds and your digestion are constantly exposed to new stimuli.
- Sit down: So often we grab food on the go, and we don't take the time needed to nourish ourselves. Make time and room for yourself to sit for each meal.

Nourish Your Soul

Cultivating healthy relationships with clear communication will help you not only give others what they need, but satisfy your own needs, too. Long-term and new relationships can both become stagnant if we don't give them the attention they deserve. And without realizing it, you begin to carry a heavier weight on your shoulders. "We spend a lot of time caring for others, and we are attracted to relationships where we give a lot and make strong connections. But there is a tipping point," says Marans. "Things become overwhelming, our own needs are not being met, and there is nothing that replenishes us." As you reassess your interpersonal ties, make a list of what's important in your life: not what's 'nice' about your life, but what you must have in it to make you happy. (i.e. love, trust, friendship, honesty, reciprocity). Then, communicate these needs to those you love. This will help you to build relationships that heal others as well as nourish your own soul.

Rest Easy

According to the National Institute of Health, getting more rest can help you bring your body into balance. When your body is out of balance, your self-esteem and sense of control drop, and your body produces more cortisol, a hormone that is linked to stress and anxiety. Cortisol also increases blood pressure and blood sugar. When you are sleep-deprived, your blood pressure and cortisol levels don't go down at night as they should. Finding better resting habits will restore your body to healthier levels so that you can tap into your inner self and find out what you and your body need. Here are some tips to help you rest easy.

- Trade exercise for extra sleep: if your body is running on empty, maybe some days exercise isn't what your body needs most. Instead, turn off the alarm clock and trade your 7:30 AM weekend yoga class and sleep in. Or, skip the lunchtime run and take a nap. The rest you give your body, and the acknowledgement that it's OK to do so, will be more revitalizing than you think.

- Be still: if napping isn't available to you, try spending a little time each day being by yourself. "Sometimes finding time for renewal can be tricky," says Marans. "But it doesn't need to take a lot of your time, and it doesn't have to cost anything." Marans suggests taking a moment while you're running around during your daily routine, and just sitting in your car and watching a sunset or simply staring up to the sky.

Take Time

Sometimes taking a step back and digging deep inside can help you learn more about yourself. Living in balance, giving of yourself and self-nurturing at the same time, is hard work, but it's worth the rewards. "If we can keep giving ourselves these daily gifts of time and nourishment, we can be flexible and think about what we need to be our best, strongest selves," says Marans. "Just recognizing that you're doing something for yourself is so important." ■



Born and raised in Riverside, RI, Kari Watson Culhane is a wife, mother-of-two, and a freelance writer. Currently living in Wellesley, MA, Kari is working on her first novel. To keep her life in balance she walks her dogs and practices yoga five days a week.



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