

# MENTAL HEALTH: Our search for balance

## PART 4 CLARIFYING VALUES SETS FOUNDATION FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE

By Joanna Brown

**IF** YOU'VE EVER WRITTEN A JOB DESCRIPTION TO HIRE A NEW MEMBER of your dental team, you probably spent the most time nailing down the salary being offered.

But the 2024 Trend Report suggests your efforts were misdirected. Today's workers are prioritizing their own well-being over career advancement and rank work-life balance at the top.

In fact, 52% of employed people globally would be willing to take a 20% pay cut for better work-life balance. And more than 70% of American survey respondents agreed with the statement, "I don't think it's worth working at a job that increases your personal stress." [on.cds.org/Ford](https://on.cds.org/Ford)

"It shocked us. I'll be honest," Jen Brace, chief futurist at Ford Motor Company who coordinated the 2024 Trend Report told the Detroit Free Press in January. "A 20% pay cut is a big deal." [on.cds.org/Detroit](https://on.cds.org/Detroit)

The monetary value workers assigned to work-life balance underscores the importance of mental health and wellness in the workplace: productivity, interpersonal relationships, focus, and feelings of compassion for patients are all lessened when the healthcare provider is feeling stressed. Striking a balance between your work life and your personal life will pay dividends in both arenas and lessen your risk of burn-out.

Consider the pre-flight instructions given by flight attendants: Secure your own oxygen mask first before helping others.

### SEEKING BALANCE

The hardest part is identifying your personal work life balance. Forbes Magazine contributor Maura Thomas explained it this way in 2022: [on.cds.org/Forbes](https://on.cds.org/Forbes)

To some, work-life balance means the

convenience of being able to manage a personal life during the work day, without the hassle of having to get permission or explain our activities to others. Another common definition of work-life balance is "equal time or priority to personal and professional activities." But both of these definitions have weaknesses that are preventing work-life balance from being the solution it should be.

As our collective awareness of mental health and wellness grows, so does our understanding of the interplay between mental health and the workplace.

Finding a balance between professional responsibilities and personal interests is one way working people are improving their mental health.

Dentists and their teams best take note. The American Dental Association's 2021 Dentist Health and Well-Being Survey found that 16% of dentists experienced anxiety and 13% experienced depression. The risk of career burn-out is high.

In 2024, the CDS Review is exploring with experts the issues around mental health: its effects, its treatments, and available resources for support.

Watch for the December issue, when reporter Joanna Brown wraps up this series.

### 'LIKE RIPPLES IN A LAKE'

That's certainly what veteran career coach and life coach Marilyn Fettner hears from her clients, who tell her they feel rudderless and pulled in too many directions. They describe to her a wide range of symptoms all related to stress: aches and pains, high blood pressure, crying over minor incidents, sleeplessness, anxiety and depression.

"Work-life balance is about having your life – personal and professional – managed in a way that gives you a sense of balance," said Ms. Fettner, of Northbrook. "Think about your roles in life.

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Some people have kids who need them, other have elderly parents, others are loners. That balance is a very individual thing, and not at all one-size-fits-all.”

She encourages these clients to engage in a values clarification: a prioritized list of their responsibilities and activities, personal and professional. This is also a time to review their career goals, so that the choices they make next are still advancing those goals.

First, block out enough time for sleeping, Ms. Fettner said (“That’s usually one of the first things affected when you’re out of balance.”). And then, she advised, find something near the bottom of the list that you can step away from. At work, this might mean taking on one less patient every month. Instead, build your list of trusted colleagues who accept referrals.

“As an entrepreneur myself, I know that sounds hard because we are programmed to never turn away business,” she said. “But have the foresight to accept that there will be times that you need a break. When you take that tiny first step, you will notice how it works like ripples in a lake.”

## Workers no longer driven to move up the ladder

Staffing agency Randstad found in January 2024 that workers are no longer driven by a desire to move up the ladder. Instead, work-life balance lies at the heart of career decisions. [on.cds.org/Randstad](https://on.cds.org/Randstad)

A survey of 27,000 workers across Europe, Asia Pacific and the Americas found that half of workers are willing to stay in a role that they like, even if there’s no room to progress or develop. Meanwhile, a third of workers never want to take on any managerial roles.

More important to them are:

- work-life balance (93%)
- mental health support (83%)
- flexibility of working hours (81%)

The study also found that 57% of workers would not accept a job that would negatively affect their work-life balance. And over a third (37%) would consider quitting if asked to spend more time in the office. [on.cds.org/reuters011724](https://on.cds.org/reuters011724)

### FILLING YOUR CUP

Alternatively, identify in your personal life one committee position you can resign from or help that friend who relies on you for household repairs to instead identify a reputable handyman.

For Chicago dentist Cristian Pavel, adding yoga to his week a decade ago was life-changing.

“I found a refreshing contrast to what

I was experiencing in the office. I just got addicted to the quiet of it,” he said. “I found myself scheduling my dentistry around my favorite yoga instructors during the week.”

Now an instructor himself, the University of Illinois College of Dentistry grad found that pursuing the parallel tracks of dentistry and yoga really helped his practice of dentistry.

“It helped me to slow down, to pay attention to my patients in the moment and not the stressors of what’s coming next around the office. But it took a long time to blend those two worlds together.”

He’s skipped family gatherings and social outings with friends, but it’s been worth it.

“It’s so hard, especially with our closest loved ones. Our propensity is to let ourselves down before we let them down. But communicate it to them,” Dr. Pavel said. “Start with your closest loved one and say, ‘I need some time for this, I need to fill myself up.’ It’s the most selfless thing you can do because you are building yourself up to be able to give again. You can’t give from an empty cup.”

Ms. Fettner agreed.

“Telling yourself, ‘I’m just gonna suck it up and keep going’ isn’t going to work,” she said. “Ask how much quality time are you really giving to all of these overcommitments, and what do you owe yourself, really.” ■

## Be open to the positive ‘in every moment’

Dentist Cristian Pavel – also a qualified yoga instructor and self-titled Dental Yogi – leads students through yoga flow during his weekly classes. But he said the same flow is present in the practice of dentistry.

“People come to yoga thinking they’re going to achieve something monumental, but that’s not it. Yoga is sweaty and awkward and uncomfortable. Your head is loud with too many thoughts rushing through it and worries that people are staring at you,” Dr. Pavel described. “Practice means learning to be OK with those thoughts and to keep going. We soften, and we recognize that the thoughts keep going without us needing to react and respond to them.”

In the dental office, the flow can still be chaotic – people walk in late, some don’t show up at all, and planned procedures change direction quickly. Dr. Pavel says to let it flow and focus on the positive.

“Find an opportunity to laugh about it in the moment. Allow the negative flow to flip. I’ve learned not to latch on to those negative thoughts, and that there is always a positive in every moment: that is irrefutable.”