

# Moving Toward A More Balanced Life As A Man

The focus of this article is on the concept of balance. What does balance mean in terms of the way we live our lives? One definition of balance that Webster's Dictionary offers is "mental and emotional steadiness." But what does that really mean? Especially in the context of life as it is for many of us today, with the numerous pushes and pulls in our current times. These include pressures like being effective as a parent, being successful at work and in making enough money, worrying about our own and others' health, and confronting the myriad mundane concerns like getting the kids to soccer games and making sure the grass gets mowed. In this article, I'll talk about one important way to help you achieve balance and I'll touch on a few of the issues that I see as important in living with "mental and emotional steadiness."

Balance has been a struggle for me my entire life. I didn't learn much about balance from my father, who was totally consumed with his work throughout the time I knew him. He had little emotional connection with his family nor did he seem to be close to or count on others outside the family circle. When he retired, he lost the major pillar of his self-esteem, his role as a physician, and had nothing to replace what work had meant to him. He became depressed. He was clear with me about what was going on emotionally for him and, at one point early in his retirement, he said 'I don't know who I am anymore.' He had never thought much about or planned for the void that no longer being a physician would bring for him. He spent much of his retirement in solitary activities, making few efforts to emotionally connect with anyone. Eventually, he suffered a heart attack and prostate cancer that metastasized to his bones and he died within six years after he had retired.

A lack of balance is also frequently the reason that many clients have come to see me. When we get "out of balance," all sorts of problems and issues can arise. We can start feeling overwhelmed with all the emotions a lack of balance can bring. We may focus inward and become anxious, depressed, or negative. We may focus outward and become angry, hostile, and even abusive to those around us. Losing a sense of balance can also lead to addictive or compulsive behaviors when an activity or substance becomes more important than anything else and begins to interfere with the rest of our lives. These behaviors might include drinking too much, gambling too much, eating too much, sexual acting-out, or even working out too much. Yes, even excesses in "positive" activities such as exercise can signal a loss of balance in our lives.

In this article, I want to touch on an area where I believe balance to be critical. This is the balance between time spent by yourself and time spent connecting with others. Individuals need different amounts of these kinds of time. And, at different times in our lives, our need for time alone and time with others may vary. But the major point of this article is that, in order to lead a balanced life, all of us need both of these kinds of experiences throughout the course of our lives.

All of us need time by ourselves. This can be especially difficult to do when we're involved with a family and a busy work schedule. But it is nevertheless important. Time alone can be a opportunity to

slow down and reflect on who we are and who we want to be. It can be a chance to tune into what we're thinking and feeling. It gives us time to consider what we want and need in our lives rather than simply running on "automatic pilot" or on a "life script" that was written by someone else that we are supposed to live. Taking this "recharging" time is a way to get to know ourselves. It's also a way to move from the frantic pace of everyday life and go inward for periods of time. Finally, it's a way to get in touch with spirituality in whatever way we define it and to allow ourselves to experience a sense of centeredness and a sense of gratitude for who we are and what we have.

People take this time in a variety of ways. Some sit in the back yard and look at the flowers. Some go for a walk in a wooded nature area. Some pray or meditate. Some get involved with solitary hobbies or activities like reading, gardening, cooking, knitting, playing the piano, writing, or refinishing antiques. All these can be worthwhile ways to slow down, tune into yourself, and "recharge your batteries."

Many people are frightened of this time alone, however. The frantic pace of being constantly busy is an effective way to avoid thinking about who you are and how you are living your life. Some people become anxious when confronted with time to themselves. And some people fill their alone time with mind-numbing activities like watching television and using alcohol or drugs. The real goal in taking time by yourself is to help you become the best person you can be.

But this alone time needs to be balanced with time around others. Some people use their alone time as a way to isolate from and avoid others. Making time to connect is important as well. There is a significant body of research that states that those who have strong emotional connections with others not only tend to become ill less frequently but also tend to live longer. We, as men, are notorious for having difficulty doing this. It may be okay to drink, play sports, and talk business and the stock market with other men. But we're often socialized to believe that, if we're lucky, we'll find a female partner who'll then take care of all our emotional needs. Unfortunately, if she's having a bad day, we're "up a creek." Many of us are also socialized to believe that we can't trust other men, so we eliminate them as people we can really count on when it comes to sharing our deepest thoughts and feelings. This leaves us isolated, alienated, and alone in a way that is very different from what I was discussing above.

Emotional connection comes in a variety of forms. The first involves connecting with your partner on a regular basis. This connecting time is really important for most of us when we first meet our partners. At that point, we generally want to spend as much time as we can with them, but this desire often falls by the wayside as our lives together become more complex. When a couple comes for therapy, one of the first things I ask them to do is to set aside weekly time when they are willing to make the commitment to be and talk with one another. Most couples having relationship problems have stopped spending non-sexual intimate time together. Time for a couple to emotionally share and connect needs to be a priority if their relationship is to be alive and healthy.

Connecting time also includes your children. The family where we are raised literally serves as a laboratory where we learn how what it is to be a human being. Children learn from us how they are supposed to be in the world; we are their emotional "tutors." So connecting is critical for our kids'

healthy development. But it's also important for us as adults. Spending connecting time with our children allows the "inner child" in all of us to come out in spontaneous and playful ways that we often do not have the opportunity to express in other settings. Children help us get back in touch with a sense of excitement and joy at simply being alive. Their very real needs also help us move from self-centeredness, self-absorption, and being preoccupied with the details of our daily lives to genuinely caring for and connecting with other human beings.

Finally, connecting time involves others outside our immediate family. This can be connecting with our own parents, siblings, and other extended family members. It can be connecting with friends and confidant(e)s, who can become part of our "chosen family." Or it can even be connecting with strangers in the course of our daily lives. The reality is that human beings (and this includes men) are social animals. We need other people. I am deeply saddened when, in working with men as clients, they respond to my question about whom they have in their lives for emotional support with the statement, "No one." We need emotional connection in order to feel whole and a part of a larger universe. We need emotional connection to achieve emotional and physical well-being.

Take the risk to talk with friends or family about what's going on with you and your life. Look for new opportunities to meet and connect with others. Support groups and other activities can be ways to do this. Think about reaching out to friends from the past with whom you have lost touch. Even saying a few additional words to a clerk at the grocery store can give your mood and self-esteem a boost.

Find some balance in these areas in your life. Take some time for yourself. Take some time to connect with others. Both can help you move toward the "mental and emotional steadiness" that makes life worth living.

### **SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO THINK ABOUT RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE:**

- 1) How much alone time do you give yourself each week and how do take time for yourself?**
- 2) If you never or rarely take time for yourself, what keeps you from doing this?**
- 3) How could you take more time for yourself at this point in your life?**
- 4) Who can you count on for emotional support in your life? Is there anything you don't feel comfortable talking about with these people?**
- 5) If you don't have people whom you can count on emotionally, why is this the case?**
- 6) How could you make connecting time with others more of a priority in your life? Who could you reach out to, from the past of in the present, to increase the emotional support and connection you have in your life?**