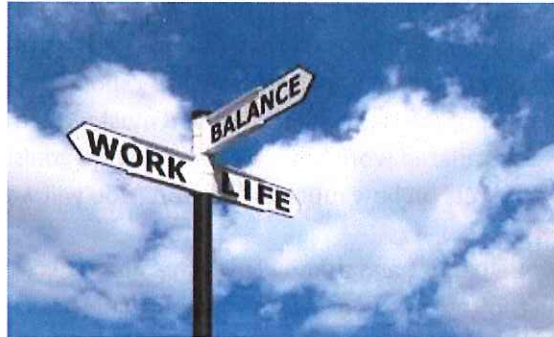


# On Finding a Work-life Balance in Graduate School

Rachel Wayne

(originally posted on <http://www.queensu.ca/connect/grad/2013/06/24/on-finding-a-work-life-balance-in-graduate-school/> accessed on August 18, 2016)



Most clinical psychology students are familiar with Rosenhan's study entitled "On being sane in insane places". Briefly, Rosenhan had subjects simulate auditory hallucinations in order to gain entry into various psychiatric institutions. Following admission into the hospital, the pseudopatients acted normally and assured staff they felt fine; nonetheless, they were forced to admit to having a mental illness and agree to take antipsychotic drugs. The moral of this story is that hospitals were unable to distinguish the pseudopatients from the real patients. In other words, it's difficult to be perceived as being "sane" in what is considered to be an "insane" place.

Now, this is not to say that we haven't come along way in differential diagnosis since 1973 (au contraire, we've made numerous advances, thankfully), but in many ways, grad school might be considered a rather extreme and stressful place to be. Perhaps everyone around you seems to be anxious and on edge, or perhaps the pressures you feel are intense and the deadlines unreasonable. Many of us feel guilty for taking time away from our work, or sometimes the situation mandates that we put in the extra hours, like when your computer suddenly decided to stage a revolt the day before your abstract for a major conference is due.

How does one stay grounded and "sane" in a place like this? Is it actually possible to emerge from graduate school having mastered an optimal work-life balance?

I like to think so! Hint: it's not working with one hand on a laptop and using the other to sip a beer. Here are a few modest tips that I have procured from my 4 years, 2 computer crashes, and ½ a comprehensive exam so far:

- 1) One buffer against academic stress is a strong support system. Don't neglect your friends and family! It can be tempting to pass up on an invite for coffee when a deadline is looming, but going out for an hour or two can do wonders for relieving stress and it also helps to keep perspective (because there is actually a world outside of the academic bubble, somewhere, I think...). Truthfully, I find that the more I don't want to go out, the more I actually really need to get out.

- 2) Set a goal for yourself outside of academia that depends on you, and only you. For me, it was starting a weight training program and setting specific targets. This way, if things weren't going well at school, I had something to fall back on to boost my confidence and sense of competency. (It also tricks your friends and faculty into believing that you have a balanced life!). But seriously, a hobby, a dance class, training for a 5k run, anything that you enjoy will do.
- 3) Set workplace boundaries—I rarely work from home and will usually work from my lab or occasionally a coffee shop. This provides physical, mental, and emotional separation of work from leisure. This way, when I am home, I don't feel like I should be working, nor do I feel guilty for not working (well, most of the time, at least). If you must work from home, consider setting up an office, or setting designated work hours or specific work goals for the day (something concrete to help you set limits on how much or how long you will work).
- 4) Progress is often slow! Be patient and acknowledge the small successes. In my case, I had to acknowledge that things often take considerably longer than I anticipated. You might reach your "time limit goal" for the day before your productivity goal, and that's OK. It happens. For example, it recently took me ALL DAY long to make one teeny part of my program to run properly (when I expected it to take two hours at maximum). And I think we forget that thinking and percolating ideas counts as progress too (even if we can't really measure it).
- 5) If you're feeling overwhelmed and stuck on something, from my experience it usually means you need to consult with a colleague or supervisor. I have to keep reminding myself that it is OK to ask for help; no one expects you to have all the answers or to know everything!

**How about you? How do you stay balanced and grounded in grad school?**