

A Balance Check

With both its challenges and its celebrations, 2018 continues to fly by, and in its jet stream, I frequently have had to do balance checks. For me—particularly in the context of the illness that has befallen a close family member—“work-life balance” has been challenging. In speaking with colleagues, I simultaneously find comfort and discomfort in the recognition that I am far from alone. As a physician in academic medicine and particularly as a director of a residency training program, the phrase “work-life balance” has become omnipresent—especially in the context of initiatives focused on physician wellbeing. However, increasingly, I eschew the particular phrase “work-life balance,” given what I consider to be its direct and paradoxical threat to our wellbeing.

Firstly, the phrase artificially identifies “work” and “life” as two distinct entities. Last I checked, “work” is part of “life.” Others utilize instead the concepts of “professional” and “personal” instead, with which I also take issue; my identity as a professional is part of my identity as a person. I fully recognize the presumed intentions both of distinguishing one’s experiences at work from those outside of work and of increasing deliberate attention to both domains so that, in particular, one’s work domain does not subsume the other domain(s) in which each of us exists. If these, indeed, are the intentions, then I favor “work life” and “home life,” acknowledging the still-present shortcomings of these terms and recognizing that we likely exist in domains other than or in addition to these two.

Secondly, the “balance” of work-life balance positions the two entities (irrespective of the specific vernacular used) at opposite ends of a fragile seesaw. As such, “work-life” implicitly becomes “work vs. life.” The two inherently are at odds with one another and, thus, there indeed is a duel in this duality. If winds change and if one side of seesaw goes up, the other presumably must go down—at least for a period of time. While the oppo-

sition between these entities does underscore the idea that “something’s gotta give” (which, in some ways, may be freeing), it simultaneously emphasizes the tension and rigidity of the implied system.

Finally, the “balance” of work-life balance further implies a forced singularity that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. It suggests that, of the infinite potential ratios between work and life, there exists only one at which balance can be attained. And, as if the task of identifying and landing on this single point were not challenging enough, the single point is a moving target. As circumstances in the various domains of our lives change, so does the positioning of the single point at which balance is feasible. I imagine the mounting frustration of a kitten trying to chase the tiny red dot of a frenetically motioned laser pointer; he can never catch and maintain that point.

Just as my active pursuit of work-life balance is a work-in-progress, so is my search for a phrase that more appropriately captures for me the goals and intentions behind the pursuit of work-life balance. For the time being, I’m settling for “work life-home life integration.” The word “integration,” including its associations with identity formation, seems to capture the possibility of many different facets of one’s personhood coming together in coexistence rather than in direct opposition. It also connotes a centeredness and a grounding that differs from the notion of tenuous balance. And “integration” feels more tenable, as less energy would be spent keeping work life and home life split off from one another and in balance/opposition with one another. “Integration” would better embrace infinite shades of ever-shifting grey.

This is a Spring/Summer double-issue of *JAACAP Connect*, and I apologize for the time that has passed between this issue and our last. As always, I am grateful for our authors’ contributions, and, with this issue, I also

am grateful for their patience. For this issue's installment of the *Lab to Smartphone* column, Rettew walks us through the arguments of those who deny the existence of psychiatric diagnoses so that we may regard their arguments as understandable—not excusable—and rededicate ourselves to correcting the misinformation about psychiatry and psychiatric diagnoses that permeates the media. Upadhyay (page 11) presents a case and a review of anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis, a disease for which the median age of onset is skewed towards adolescents and young adults. D'Amelio and Glowinski (page 15) present graphic novels as an underutilized adjunct when teaching narrative medicine and psychiatric illness to trainees in their pre-clinical

years. Kessler (page 20) encourages mental health professionals to consider the liberation psychology of Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit social psychologist, and to use its premises to identify and transform social structures that cause or perpetuate psychosocial trauma. Finally, Thordarson, Paternostro, and Friedberg (page 25) suggest that we integrate into traditional Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with young patients various popular culture icons who frequently are presented as flawed, who struggle, and who persevere.

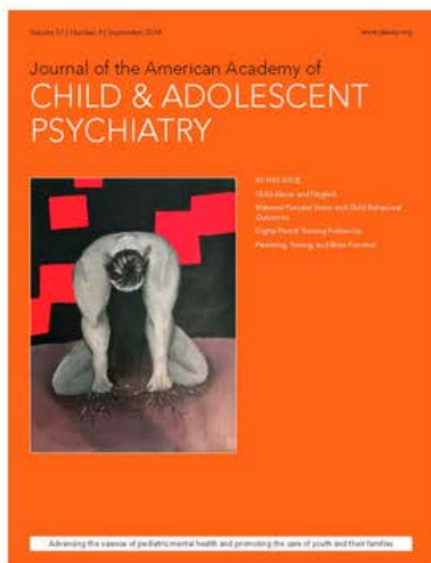
Oliver M. Stroeh, MD
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