

Balance in life

do we really need it?



Beethoven created the magnificent fifth symphony and eventually drank himself to death. On the other hand Bach led a religious family life and composed the intensely romantic harpsichord concertos. Bill Gates leads a regular family life whereas Steve Jobs is known for his messy personal life.

Passion appears to be an essential ingredient to achieve great heights in life, but must passion imply single minded devotion which must neglect all other “distractions”? Do we really desire balance in life at the cost of diluting passion? In the above examples, it is not clear!

When asked if balance in life is important, most successful people tend to say, “Of course!” or “Eventually, yes!” However, in a competitive business environment, the ambition to rise up quickly is so high that setting balance aside is the most common thing to do. Balance seems like bran cereal, everyone agrees that it is good for you but very few people are able to eat it every day!

Is balance boring?

There are many meanings of balance in life, from moderation in everything you taste in life to harmony in different aspects of life (see box) to non-attachment as in Hindu/Buddhist philosophy. Do these meanings of balance sound boring? If they do, it is because of certain myths.

First: balance does not lead to success. Most famous successful people – Einstein, Madam Curie, Freud, Gandhi, Van Gogh, Picasso, Mother Theresa, Lee Iococca, the list can go on – exhibit tendency towards non-moderation. However, it is worth pointing out that successful people with balanced lives do not make interesting stories.

Second: success that comes with relentless passion will lead to greater happiness. The reality is that it may indeed lead to short term bouts of happiness, but it may not lead to long term happy life. Two research findings are worth mentioning. First is called “flow” which means getting totally immersed in achieving difficult goals. This is shown to create almost blissfully happy moments. On the other hand, the second research finding shows that people who pass objective measures of happiness live ordinary lives with not very intense highs and intense lows. So, outcomes from focused passion may sound more exciting and ego-enhancing, however, beware of the possibility that the “highs” will most likely not last a lifetime.

One important finding in favour of balance is that the most important ingredient in long term happiness is good relationships with family and friends. Some fundamental need in human beings gets satisfied by building connections with other human beings.

Lastly: one can casually choose balance. Not so. People value balance or relentless passion because that is what they internally want. Typically, such tendencies change because of a significant event that shakes their belief system. Mahatma Gandhi possibly would not have stopped his experiments with truth, had a doctor warned him of the danger of a failed family life!

Balance spiced up!

If one cannot casually choose balance, then why discuss balance at all? This is why.

An average Indian student in a top B-school today has a modified notion of

balance that is far from boring.

The new mantra is “I want it all and I want it in this life!” Balance means achieving success in every facet of life. Not with moderation, but with intensity. Material success, recognition for their work, ability to change lives and community, family and friends, spiritual or religious needs, good health, attractive social personality – they want it all. They understand that they may not get it all today and that it may have to be achieved in phases, but they want it. They understand that it is difficult and demanding to distribute energies to have passion for it all, but they are willing and eager. Their doubts about their ability to do it go in the background and they keep working towards this balance!

Today’s role models – Bill Gates, Narayan Murthy, Anil Ambani Latha Krishnan, Kiran Mujumdar-Shaw – have achieved their goals beyond imagination with relentless passion. They have changed thousands of lives, accumulated wealth, have led life-styles of their own choice – flamboyant or simplistic, yet they are surrounded by families and close friends.

Is it possible?

Is it realistic to want to have it all like the role models? The answer is yes.

Any state of imbalance, as a matter of fact, need not be a destabilizing experience. On the contrary, it could be a motivating factor, a driving force for moving closer towards the goal! It would indeed be “boring” to quickly achieve the perfect state of balance and then to stay there “forever”. What adds spice to the process of getting balance in life is the process of

fighting imbalance! Achieving such balance is a lifelong process and ensuring an enjoyable process of working towards such balance is perhaps more crucial than achieving it!

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Working towards self-actualization would involve achieving ten-fold balance between:

- Preserving my spirit and having an intimate relationship
- Individuation and fulfilling family responsibilities
- Responsibility to my own family and responsibility to the community
- Need for excitement and need for stability
- Thinking intellectually and feeling the emotions
- Materialism and spiritual needs
- Ensuring safe future and enjoying the moment
- Impulsive adventure and considerate caution
- Striving for perfection and accepting human flaws