

## How to balance work, school and life

By [Robert Strohmeyer](#)



Whether you're a professional returning to college in midlife or a 20-something working your way through your studies while working full time, balancing work commitments with an academic course load can make your statistics class look like a piece of cake.

For many of us, the inherent challenge of balancing two important obligations (work and school) is compounded by family and relationship commitments, social interests and other pursuits that demand our attention as we strive for a fulfilling life.

Here we'll explore some useful strategies for **achieving your best learning outcomes** without sacrificing your goals or leaving your family behind.

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### 1. Priority, not parity

No matter how you slice it, the goal while juggling work, school and life should be to **achieve your goals without burning out**. That means you need to think about your commitments in terms of priority, not equality.

Prioritization is all about **knowing your goals** and understanding what's required to achieve them. Consider questions like:

- Are you working to pay your way through school? Or are you a returning student with a career already in progress?
- What are your goals for your education? Are you earning a degree to prepare for a promotion or create new career opportunities? Or is your academic program for personal enrichment?
- Are you planning to keep your current job after you finish your degree or are you open to change?

Answering these kinds of questions can help you to better articulate your objectives and can inform the way you prioritize school and work.

Through an **honest self-inventory of your goals and priorities**, you may discover that either school or your job is the higher priority of the two, and this can be a powerful realization in striking the right balance for you.

### **Keep your focus flexible**

No matter which option is the higher priority, it's important to recognize things change, sometimes weekly.

Rather than try to evenly divide your time and effort between work, school and family, you may find yourself better served by considering **which aspect requires the most attention** during a specific time frame, like a day or a week. Then, fill in the remaining time with important activities for the other priorities.

For longer-term planning, consider:

- **Downshifting or changing jobs:** If you're burned out or in a dead-end job, scaling back at work or even finding a more accommodating position somewhere else may make sense.
- **Seek flexibility from school:** If your job is the higher priority, you should consider an [academic program that will be flexible](#) enough to let your work come first. If you must work full time, consider an academic program that's designed for part-time students.

The rise in remote work and [online education](#) may offer an advantage in balancing the two, since home-based work and school require no physical commute.

Even if your company is among those requiring workers to [return to the office](#), you can still maximize your time by identifying an **online academic program** that doesn't require regular trips to a campus. An increasing variety of academic programs are not only online but also asynchronous, meaning you can sign in to your classes on your own schedule and participate via prerecorded lectures, assigned readings and online discussions.

### **Family matters**

Your personal relationships need the same consideration as your set priorities. If you have a partner and children, you'll need to **ensure that their needs are fully met** and that you're present for them each day.

If you're single, you still need to prioritize your friendships and family relationships, though you may have more flexibility in how often you engage.

**Communicate to the ones you love** what you're focused on and why. Especially when your goal is a short-term one (e.g., earning a degree), you can often garner their support so long as you engage them as partners.

## **2. Manage your priorities**

Even after you've defined your priorities at the highest level, your actual schedule is likely to vary widely from week to week. School midterms and finals, big projects or business trips at work, and major family events can all lead to **dramatic shifts in time investment** for a given week. This is when time management and proactive scheduling can help keep things in order.

If you don't already use a **reliable calendar system** to manage your time, you should probably start. The specific type of calendar is less important than the consistent maintenance of it. Google Calendar, Microsoft Outlook and Apple's built-in tools are options. Some people find it more helpful to use paper-based planners.

Whichever method you prefer, **proactively scheduling** major events at school, work and home so you can see them at a glance and review them regularly will help you to plan and make commitments effectively. If you know that midterms, which you can't reschedule, are coming up in a few weeks and you're making plans for a business trip, you can try to adjust the trip dates to give you time for midterm focus. Likewise, if you see well in advance that you have heavy workloads coming up for both school and work, you can set expectations with family and friends and ask for support.

Productivity expert David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, recommends **habitual weekly reviews** to ensure you keep your priorities straight. In a weekly review, you take inventory of your upcoming commitments and schedule, take time to consider which commitments may have fallen behind (or fallen off altogether), and organize your priorities for the week ahead. This habit can be powerful in reducing anxiety and resetting your focus on what's important in the coming week.

### 3. Prioritize self-care

Throughout all of life, but especially in times of high stress, a consistent routine of self-care is essential to health and productivity. While a half-hour workout can feel like an indulgence when work and college commitments are weighing on you, the research consistently demonstrates that **regular exercise reduces stress** and improves mental health and mental acuity.

In other words, people think and work better when exercise is a part of their life.

With that in mind, give yourself permission to go for walks, go to the gym, take a yoga class or do whatever physical exercise you enjoy. You'll feel better, and your school and work performance will benefit.

Likewise, a **healthy diet** is a major factor in overall well-being and mental performance. It can be tempting to hit the fast-food drive-thru or throw a processed meal in the microwave when you're pressed for time when studying after working hours. But staying **mindful of the nutritional value** of your diet and prioritizing healthy options over convenience will pay off in energy, focus and mood. Some foods may even help you improve mental performance and do your best work at school and work, [according to Harvard health researchers](#). Leafy greens, fatty fish, berries, tea and coffee, and walnuts have all been linked to increased mental acuity and performance.

Finally, **don't neglect your sleep**. A vast body of research shows that sleep deficits negatively affect not only stress and anxiety, but also cognitive function and physical health.

As [sleep researcher Charles A. Czeisler, MD, PhD, points out](#), a week of sleeping four or five hours a night induces an impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.1%, a common legal threshold for being considered drunk. Just as you wouldn't show up to work or school after a few drinks, you shouldn't start your day in a state of severe sleep deprivation. To perform your best, be sure to get the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep each night, and don't feel guilty about it.

## Embrace the challenge

When things get overwhelming, [Mental Health America](#) recommends some fairly simple practices that can help you cope:

- **Take care of the basics:** Drink water, have a snack, take a shower or give yourself a nap to help recalibrate your body and mind.
- **Find a mood-booster:** A funny video on social media, a favorite movie, reading a biography of someone you admire — all these things can help you feel better fast.
- **Practice relaxation:** Sometimes, tapping into the physical can help the mental. Exercises like grounding, breathing, meditation and guided muscle relaxation can help your mind and body settle down.

Ultimately, your academic journey and your career are your own, and you should manage them your way. There's no single formula that's right for everyone, and it may take trial and error to find the balance and lifestyle that are uniquely yours and healthy for you. The advice here is simply offered to help you consider your own goals, priorities and approach. We wish you success and well-being on your path.

## Taking care at UOPX

University of Phoenix recognizes life and school aren't easy. To support students in achieving their goals, the University offers the following:

- **[Math and writing resources](#):** Going back to college doesn't mean starting from scratch. Tutoring and online resources are available to help bring you up to speed.
- **[Life Resource Center](#):** Sometimes you just have to talk to someone. Or listen. Or watch. That's why students can access life coaching, counseling and more than 5,000 webinars, podcasts, articles and assessments to help them figure out their own path.
- **[Fixed tuition](#):** No one likes surprises, especially when it comes to tuition. At UOPX, students lock in one flat rate the day they enroll.

For additional information please visit: <https://www.phoenix.edu/blog/balancing-school-and-work.html>