

Improving Work–Life Satisfaction for Women Scientists

Science is a fun and interesting career, but it rarely, if ever, fits into a nice 9-to-5 box. If you are a woman scientist, you have probably experienced some of the challenges of balancing your career and the rest of your life. You may have discovered how working long hours can adversely impact your health, morale, productivity, and social life, not to mention your family relationships and obligations. While I was President of the Association for Women in Science (AWIS), we conducted a survey to find out how women scientists, both satisfied and dissatisfied, were attempting to cope with these challenges. What emerged were some ground rules for becoming (and remaining) a successful, satisfied woman in science.



Phoebe Leboy

Cultivate a Strong Support Network

It is important that a woman scientist negotiate a personal life with shared responsibilities. Raising children or taking care of elderly parents is not just a woman's role but one that should be shared equally by all parties concerned. We usually pay lip service to this but often find it difficult to insist that our partners and spouses live up to it. Although it may involve some uncomfortable discussions, it is important to get agreement that care-giving tasks will be equitably distributed.

Moving beyond family responsibilities, it is critical to take time out for yourself. One good way to accomplish this is to cultivate a strong support network. All too often we think we have to be the Lone Ranger. There are going to be times in your life when you feel overwhelmed, scared, or unsure about what to do next. Those are the very times when a strong support network, perhaps a group of peers, can help. One such support network is discussed in an audio file available at www.ascb.org/files/wicb94.wav. (See also *Every Other Thursday* by Ellen Daniell¹ and the May 2007 WICB column by Susan L. Forsburg.²)

Take Advantage of Flexible Work Schedules

Scientists have a remarkable amount of job flexibility. Some days you will feel that there simply are not enough hours in the day to allow you to get everything accomplished. But although you put in long hours, there is often considerable leeway in deciding when the work will be done—and you are usually the person who decides. An uninterrupted workday is not always required: You can trade mid-day lab hours for evening lab hours in order to attend a child's school play.

The flexibility that you have as a scientist can provide you with greater satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment on both personal and professional levels. And if you currently don't have that flexibility, keep in mind some options when searching for your next position: A full-time position with modified duties, job sharing, or even a part-time position may be just right for you at this time and help you to achieve your goals.

Make an Investment

Investing in childcare and household help can go a long way in alleviating the stress that you will have when you are working. Are the children being looked after properly? Who will do the housework? How can I handle a full-time position and raise children at the same time? Ask your friends and family for suggestions on great childcare providers. Peace of mind is important, and you want to make sure you can focus while at work without having to worry about your children.

If you find that you are spending all of your personal time on housework and your partner is not pitching in, hire someone to do the work. You may be a postdoc earning less than \$50,000 per year, but for the equivalent of two lattes per day you can pay for biweekly housecleaning.



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Build Rituals for Renewing Energy

You can think of it as “recharging your batteries”—finding ways to reengage with the rest of your life after spending a long day (or many days) in the lab. To stay at peak performance, you must build your own rituals to help you recover from the stressors you endure. Exercise is important and is a good relief valve, but there are many other things that you can do to alleviate stress. Begin a new hobby or go back to an old one that you love, meet up with friends, read a good book, or simply laugh out loud! Of course, it is important to get enough sleep. Eat properly: Your body needs fuel, and a proper diet will help you to maintain the amount of energy that you need as you go through the day.

Choose Wisely

When I say choose wisely, I am talking about your husband or partner. You will want someone who will be there for you and will be able to support you as a woman scientist. This person should play an integral role in your life, not only helping to cheer you on as you tackle more challenging roles or take on additional responsibilities but also treating your lives together as a true partnership. I am very fortunate to be married to a wonderful man who has been my biggest critic as well as my biggest supporter. We have a great deal of mutual respect for each other and value what we have accomplished together in both our professional and our personal lives.

Do NOT Set Work–Life Boundaries

You may think it odd that I suggest not setting work–life boundaries. After all, how is work–life satisfaction achievable if we do not establish boundaries? But boundaries imply rigidity, the antithesis of flexibility. Seek fluidity between your personal life and your career. There will be times when family responsibilities have a lower priority

than a grant deadline or a really important experiment that requires you to work through the weekend. But there will also be times when rewriting a paragraph one more time is less important than your kid’s soccer game or your time at the gym.

It is inevitable that work activities will compete with personal activities, but erecting boundaries is not the solution. Our happiest and most successful AWIS members have found that much of the tension between their work life and their personal life disappears if they allow overlap between the two spheres. They bring their children into the lab and let them see what mommy does. They bring their work home, demonstrating that their professional life is important to personal satisfaction.

Work–life satisfaction is not about spending an equal amount of time on personal and professional priorities all of the time. Work–life needs will fluctuate throughout your life, your career, and sometimes even within one day! Managing your work–life satisfaction is a lifelong experiment. If one strategy does not work for you, there are others that you can try. ■

—Phoebe Leboy, *University of Pennsylvania*

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Note

This article was prepared with the assistance of Cindy Simpson, director of Programs and External Relations at AWIS. It is based on a presentation developed by AWIS and funded by a grant from the Elsevier Foundation. Phoebe Leboy is the Immediate Past President of AWIS. She has been a member of ASCB for 50 years.

References

¹Daniell E. (2006). *Every Other Thursday*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²Forsburg SL. (2007). A network of our own. *ASCB Newsletter* 30(5), 18–19. www.ascb.org/files/0705wicb.pdf.