



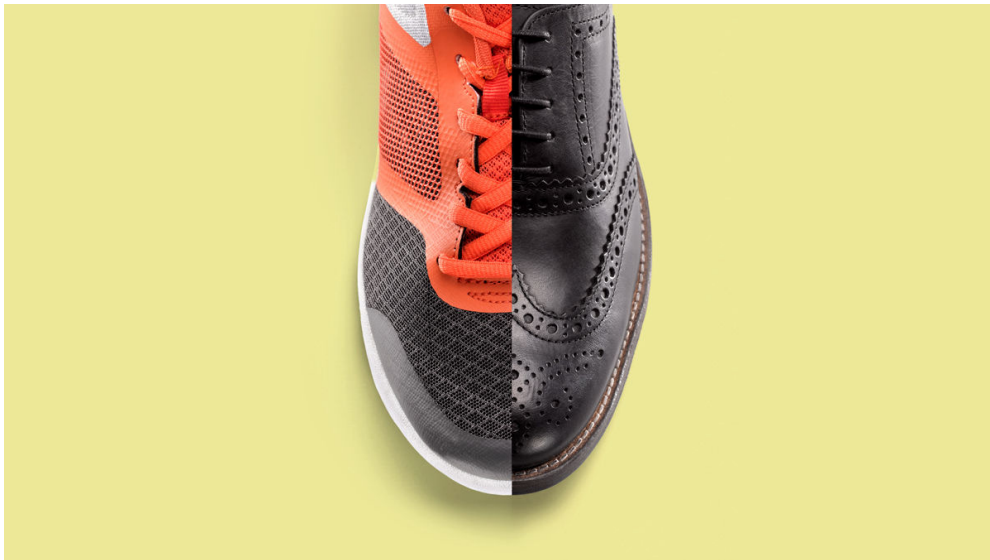
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Digital Article / Work-life Balance

# How to Create Harmony Between Your Personal and Professional Goals

New research finds that chasing multiple dreams doesn't have to mean choosing between them. *by Jiabi Wang and Ayelet Fishbach*

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**Marie Curie not only broke scientific ground** by winning two Nobel Prizes for her pioneering work in chemistry and physics; she was also a devoted mother. Following the early death of her husband, Pierre Curie, she raised two young girls, then just one- and eight-years old, on her own. Was she torn between her roles as a scientist and a single mother? Perhaps. Yet we believe it is also possible that she experienced

these roles as coexisting in harmony, introducing her daughters to her world of science. The result? Her eldest went on to win a Nobel Prize in chemistry, too.

Your life requires attending to multiple goals. You may care deeply about your family, health, leisure, community, and career. These goals shape who you are. Letting go of any one of them can feel like losing a part of yourself. While juggling many goals is inevitable, feeling torn between them should not be. In [our new research](#), we found that pursuing a career need not mean constant tension with everything else. Work-life balance doesn't have to feel like life is in constant dissonance. It can feel like a symphony.

Across 11 samples in 10 countries, we found that how people view the relationship between their goals matters. In particular, those who experience the most harmony between aspirations tend to view their goals in one of two ways: they either see how one goal can advance another (for example, having success in a career can help finance a desired vacation); or they view succeeding in one goal as complementing another (for example, enjoying a vacation helps them come back refreshed and ready to do good work).

Most people experience goal harmony, at least some of the time. But, through various studies, we found that those better able to draw many connections between their pursuits were more likely to stick to them, felt higher levels of motivation, were more productive, less stressed and burned out, and felt greater anticipation toward the future than those who saw few connections—or even conflict—between their goals. Best yet, our research provides evidence that this connection-building habit can be learned. We draw from our study to help you work toward your goals more productively and with fewer sacrifices.

## How to Create Goal Harmony

The first step to creating harmony between your goals is to find a way to mentally integrate them, imagining the ways your goals may be connected. In one study, we asked online workers to reflect on how their work and leisure goals, health and financial goals, or family and community goals might be linked. Simply identifying these connections between pairs of goals increased their sense of goal harmony by 22% compared with another group who considered how the goals in each pair might conflict. Some of their reflections were especially insightful. They wrote:

- “By being more relaxed, I will be able to work more efficiently” (Work–Leisure pair).
- “The healthier I remain, the more money I can save” (Health–Finance pair).
- “I could absolutely take my parents out with me to volunteer at the church” (Family–Community pair).

In another study, we asked online workers to identify actions that serve several goals at once, and then also prompted them to reflect on how pursuing one goal could also advance another. For example, a customer service employee told us that learning more about clients’ personalities not only improved his ability to connect with them and succeed professionally, but also deepened his understanding of people, even fictional yet complex characters on television. Participants in this condition reported a 12% increase in their sense of goal harmony.

To practice mental integration, start by listing your main life goals and the specific activities required to achieve each one. Then, look for connections among the goals. Perhaps one goal directly advances another, or two goals complement each other to make life feel richer and more meaningful. Alternatively, consider whether an activity serving

one goal might also move you closer to another, allowing you to advance multiple goals at once.

Goal harmony also develops through social learning and over time. Our culture teaches us how goals relate to one another. For example, we often hear that pursuing family goals means something different for mothers than for fathers: women are expected to invest time in caregiving, while men are expected to provide financially. These cultural expectations shape perceptions of work-family harmony. Because a job provides financial support for the family but also competes for time with it, working fathers tend to report greater work-family harmony than working mothers.

Collectivistic cultures place a high value on harmony and conflict avoidance, which extends to how people experience their goals as interconnected rather than competing. Growing up in China, one of us (Jiabi) often heard that “being a diligent student is integral to being a good daughter.” Today, she experiences her family and professional aspirations as naturally aligned. Consistent with this, our study participants who were from countries with collectivistic cultures—India, China, Indonesia, Egypt, and Mexico—reported greater natural goal harmony than those in more individualistic countries, including the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands.

### **The Benefits of Goal Harmony**

Goal harmony boosts motivation because pursuing one goal also advances others. You “feed two birds with one scone” (we assume you do not wish to kill birds with stones). For example, if you see regular exercise as a way to sustain your energy at work, you will feel motivated to stay active not only for your health but also for your career. In this way, a workout does not take time away from work; it feels like progress on multiple fronts.

These motivational benefits persist over time. In a two-month study, we tracked people's adherence to their New Year's resolutions. In January, online workers listed three resolutions, such as finding a new job or getting promoted, exercising more, and eating more healthily. They also reported their experience of goal harmony. Two months later, those who perceived greater goal harmony were significantly more likely to stick with their resolutions.

Goal harmony also promotes well-being by reducing the anxiety that comes from time pressure and goal conflict. When your goals feel connected, you are less likely to feel overwhelmed or burned out. Indeed, in the above study linking work-leisure, health-financial, and family-community goals, those who reflected on goal connections not only reported higher motivation but also lower levels of time stress and burnout, and greater anticipation for each day, compared with those who considered how their goals might compete for resources.

Additionally, we found that reflecting on goal connections can have a positive impact on workplaces, even beyond the individual. In one study, we examined the common workplace dilemma present in mentoring: given limited resources should you spend time coaching a junior colleague, or focus on your own work? We asked online workers to reflect on how helping another worker might also benefit their own performance, for example, by providing useful practice. They then completed a typing task, first to earn a bonus for another worker and later to earn one for themselves. Those who had first reflected on the overlap between helping others and advancing their own goals completed 17% more work to earn a bonus for the other person while working just as hard to earn a bonus for themselves. This study revealed an important implication for leaders: to encourage mentoring, highlight the harmony between supporting others' growth and one's own. Far

from a sacrifice, mentoring can be understood as a way of advancing personal interests.

### **Why Goal Conflict Is Sometimes Beneficial**

But here is the twist: harmony helps goals in central domains such as work and family. Yet there are times when priorities must be set; pursuing some goals while letting others go. Maybe demands are too great, and you will have to make choices. Possibly what you desire isn't really a goal; it's a temptation that will undermine your achievements. You cannot always have your cake and eat it too, and it is just as important to recognize conflict as it is to cultivate harmony.

Sometimes there is a self-control conflict: you might feel tempted to stay in bed and call in sick instead of going to work, or scroll through social media instead of finishing that report. Your overriding goals represent what you should be doing, while temptations are those things you may want to do but ought not. Decades of research on self-control find that the first step in resisting temptation is recognizing the conflict they pose.

Research by [Gabriele Oettingen and colleagues](#) introduced the WOOP method (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan). After setting a goal—by identifying a wish and a desired outcome—recognizing potential obstacles is critical, as it allows people to plan how to overcome them. Similarly, research on [counteractive control](#) [coauthored by one of us](#), found that anticipating temptations equips people to resist them and stay committed to their goals. For example, [in another study](#), students who anticipated a difficult take-home assignment were more likely to complete it sooner. In a self-control dilemma, ignoring or downplaying the conflict can undermine goal achievement and make impulsive choices easier to justify.

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Multiple goals do not have to create dissonance; they can form a symphony. The most motivated people are not simply more disciplined; they are more strategic. They know how to reframe and realign their important goals so they work in concert, and when to draw a clear line and prioritize one goal over another.

Companies that invest in work-life balance—through flexible hours, remote options, or subsidized childcare—already foster goal harmony between employees’ professional and family roles. Yet more can be done. A workplace that encourages movement, such as standing or walking meetings, allows employees to advance their professional and health goals at the same time. Similarly, neighborhood partnerships or “bring your friends to work” days strengthen both social and community ties to one’s professional life. Perhaps the best place to start is by guiding yourself and your employees to reflect on how goals align and with which impulses they may conflict.

Marie Curie did not choose career over family; she navigated both with wisdom. She allowed her roles as scientist and mother to reinforce one another, inviting her daughters into the scientific world she loved and building a legacy that spanned generations. Her life reminds us that the most remarkable achievements often arise not from choosing between goals, but from skillfully weaving them together.

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