

Success secret: Compartmentalising



VANITA WEARS: JUMPER, FRENCH CONNECTION; SKIRT, ANTHROPOLOGIE; JEWELLERY AND WATCH, HER OWN; SHOES, GANNI

Have these women SOLVED THE WORK/LIFE BALANCE?

The answer is... possibly. With demanding jobs and busy home lives, they've each found a method for coping with the madness

Words MOLLY GUNN Photographs KATIE WILSON ELL

VANITA PARTI, 43, is the founder of Blink eyebrow bars. She lives in west London with her husband, Shailendra, and children, Anya, 11, Aryan, nine, and Anushka, four

I LAUNCHED BLINK IN AUTUMN 2004, AFTER realising a need for a walk-in eyebrow bar. It has grown considerably since, with 24 concessions and 150 employees. Now I keep an eye on the business and make sure it ticks along, but when I first set it up, my two elder children were young and I worked around the clock, with them in tow. I'm not organised naturally and sometimes I wonder how I've got the business this far. I realised I needed a new approach when I started letting things slip – forgetting jeans day at school and letting the dinner burn because I was distracted by work. My business was not getting the best from me and nor were my children.

Compartmentalising is the method that keeps us all sane, so now I try to keep my work and kids

time as separate as possible. There is no point being with the kids, but thinking about other things. And on the flip side, I have to be totally there mentally when making work decisions.

My method is to try to get as much work done during the school day as possible – and in that time I am completely focused. I save time by saying 'no' to meetings for the sake of meetings. I only take calls past 4pm if they're vital – because there have been unprofessional moments when one of my kids answers a business call or they start bickering in the background.

Blink is open around the clock, so I don't switch my phone off completely, but I don't check emails at all when I've stopped working. I always ensure that Fridays and the weekends are off limits for work. It is important to switch off when I'm with the children – it has taken years of training, but it's invaluable. And it's made me learn that sometimes it helps to have time to think before you reply to an email or call. Really, the key to compartmentalising is learning to accept that the world will not fall apart if you don't deal with something straight away. >>

‘Limiting my expectations helped me feel less stressed and stay sane’

CHLOE AXFORD, 37, is a broadcast journalist. She lives in Ashburton, Devon, with husband Nick and children Ella, three, and Jonas, seven months

THROUGHOUT MY CAREER IN TELEVISION and online journalism, I’ve worked in a fast-paced news environment where multitasking is key. Every day in a newsroom is varied and busy, a culture I thrive in. I’m used to being in control and making things happen. Before I had children, this pace would always carry through to time off and I’d approach weekends with a mental ‘to do’ list of activities. Feeling I’ve achieved something has always been important to me and I love to know I’ve done something creative or useful by the end of each day.

Things changed when I had my daughter, Ella. Within a few weeks of maternity leave, still in my pyjamas at midday and faced with the chaos of a screaming baby and messy kitchen, I realised something would have to give. I’d set myself a list of things I would do: cook a meal, go for a walk, do some gardening, answer emails, as well as look after the baby. It was a shock to realise I couldn’t achieve it all; it felt like I had lost all control and I needed to get it back. Limiting my expectations helped me feel less stressed and stay sane.

Now that I also have a son, Jonas, and I’m back working part-time, my method is to set One Big Thing to do on days off and weekends. It might be going out for a long walk, indulging my passion for creative writing, booking a holiday, catching up with a friend over a long phone call, or cooking a risotto – it doesn’t have to be groundbreaking, but it does have to be non-childcare related, so that



I feel I’m doing something for me. I count myself happy if I achieve my one thing in its entirety and I don’t feel the pressure to get anything else done, other than spend time with Ella and Jonas.

Sometimes I have to employ tunnel vision to make sure I get my one thing done – for instance, if I want to do some writing in the evening I’ll have a sandwich for dinner, so I don’t have to wash up. Instead of feeling limited, I’ve found unexpected pleasure in scaling back my ambitions. I find I focus on the one thing, rather than rushing a multitude of things. My time feels more about quality than quantity. This has made me feel less stressed and improved the time I spend with my children, as I’m not trying to cram lots of activities into a day. I’ve come to realise that if you do one big thing a day you can achieve a lot over time. >>

FRANCES HAWLEY, 33, runs Health Is Happiness, a nutritional consultancy. She lives in Bristol with her boyfriend, Gareth, and is expecting their first child

I LEFT A CAREER IN LAW IN 2007. I WAS stressed out and had realised it just wasn't the career for me. I retrained as a nutritionist and, last October, set up Health Is Happiness, which provides nutritional consultations for all sorts of health conditions, and is also a healthy-food delivery service. I launched formally in March 2012 and, beforehand, a friend told me about Mowgli, a not-for-profit organisation that pairs business mentors with aspiring entrepreneurs. It's daunting setting up in business alone, so I thought this sounded like a fantastic opportunity to have a successful business person behind me.

The process kicked off with a weekend trip to a country hotel with Mowgli, where I was partnered with Marissa Ellis, who has over a decade's experience in multi-million-pound technology solutions. On paper, we have very different experience, but that didn't matter. The first thing we did was go for a two-hour wander in the countryside and I talked about my hopes and ambitions for the business. I felt an instant connection and was privileged to have Marissa's help from the start. From then on, we met every couple of weeks, which has been invaluable. The emotional support I have got from Marissa has helped me stay strong, focused and grow the

business. Starting out, I felt as if I had to put on a brave face, even when I was terrified, so it was great to have a confidential relationship with Marissa. Family and friends will always support you and think you're amazing, but a mentor is objective. I have such admiration and respect for Marissa; I not only trust her advice, but it's as though she is the final gatekeeper to key decisions. She is a motivating force, helping me to always strive to do the very best I can – even when I'm completely exhausted after a 70-hour week.

I'd recommend anyone who wants to start their own business to find themselves a mentor. It doesn't have to be through a formal programme, like mine was – don't be afraid to contact business people you admire directly. Your mentor needn't be someone who works in the same industry as you, either. As long as they're successful at what they do, you can have faith that they can help you to realise your potential. ■

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