

## Aiming for Balance in Life

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### Summary

*Each week we're given 168 hours to use as we choose, but too often we overlook this gift and let our time be taken over by circumstances. If we instead consider the activities that matter most to us and enrich our life, we can come closer to the mythical notion of 'balance'. Balance is not about 'getting it right' but instead choosing how we allocate our time to enhance our enjoyment of life.*

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Often when people talk of 'balance' they refer specifically to work-life balance, but this tends to generate an immediate sense of frustration or failure.

When I refer to balance, I'm instead referring to the notion that we can deliberately structure our life according to our values, priorities, and goals; it is our choice how we allocate time in our life to different activities.

Yes, there are external constraints (e.g. the need for an income, care of loved ones, not choosing illegal activities, etc) but if we don't realise that we have the option of dividing up our time according to informed choices, circumstances will fill our time for us.

When striving for a life that is rich and rewarding, it pays to consider the various aspects of life that matter to us, the activities that nurture our souls, and the things that make life feel good and worthwhile.



It might be helpful to picture your week as composed of 168 dollar coins, instead of hours. Imagine that you're selecting piggy banks in which to invest those coins. Identify what those piggy banks represent (using the categories below as a prompt), then choose how many coins you allocate to each.

Life can be divided many ways, but I will propose some potentially overlapping groupings here; choose the ones that resonate with you, add in others I might have overlooked, and omit those that aren't relevant.

**Physical** - attending to our physical needs is crucial for enhancing our engagement with life. Our basic physical needs include nutrition, movement / exercise, sleep, and caring for our physical and mental health. Pressures of modern life can easily lead us to neglect our core needs, such as sleep (adults generally need 7-9 hours for optimum health) and an adequate intake of vitamins and minerals from food.

**Spiritual** - although spiritual might refer to religious beliefs, it is a much broader construct that refers to whatever gives our life meaning. For some people that might include meditative practices or yoga, for others it might be time spent in nature, while others might meet their spiritual needs through doing things that help others or somehow enhance the world. For life to feel purposeful, we need to have a sense of connection with others or something outside ourselves.

**Creative** - creativity takes many forms. While we are not all endowed with natural talents in generating new possibilities or making things, humans seem to have a need to express themselves through creativity, playing with ideas and materials to express an emotion or

generate a product. Think laterally about whether there is a creative endeavour that feeds your spirit, whether that be cooking, photography, sculpture, welding materials together, sewing, dancing, or something else entirely.

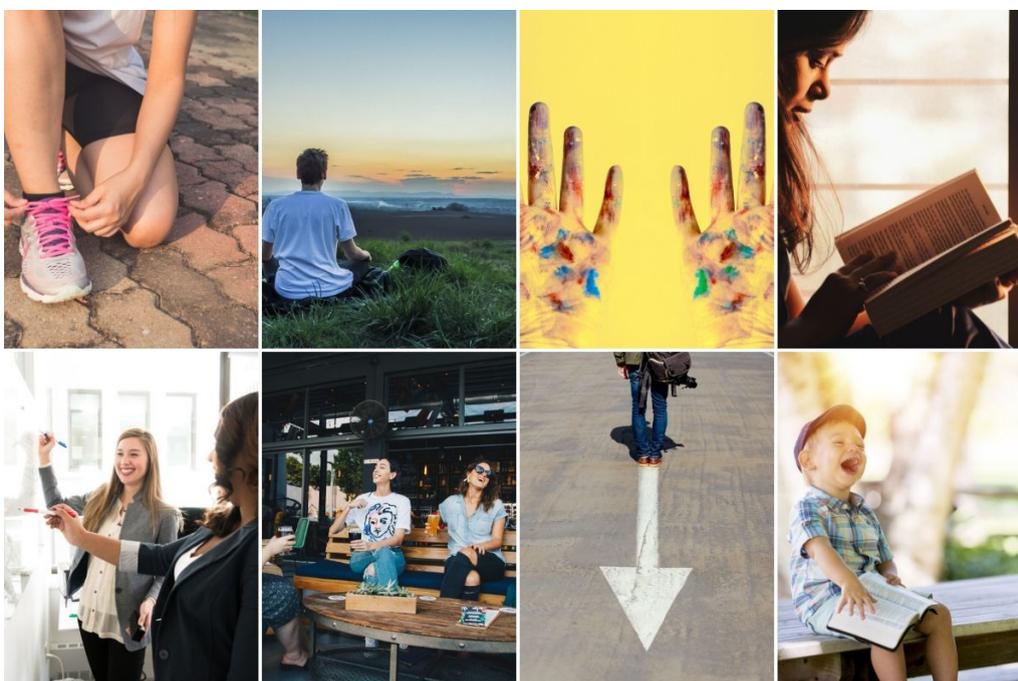
**Intellectual** - humans, like many animals, enjoy novelty and intellectual stimulation. Some people thrive on pitting their skills against a cryptic crossword, while others find completing a jigsaw puzzle soothing and sufficiently challenging. Intellectual stimulation might be found in watching documentaries about animals or taking a recreational class in cheese making. There are no rules about what provides intellectual stimulation but our brains, like our bodies, need and enjoy exercise.

**Vocational** - work tends to provide pattern and purpose to our lives. It doesn't need to be paid work, but for most people employment provides structure and routine, both of which humans benefit from. It is a bonus if work also provides a sense of satisfaction and achievement; sometimes we have to work at obtaining these through the way we engage with others in the work setting. For many people, volunteer work provides benefits over paid employment because there's greater awareness of choosing to engage in it and the knowledge that participation can be withdrawn whenever they choose.

**Social / Connection** - feelings of connection to others and a sense that we enhance others' enjoyment of life makes us happy. Social contact can occur incidentally (e.g. saying 'g'day' to the neighbour over the fence or talking to the bus driver) or deliberately (catching up with friends) or through facets of our lives, such as working or playing sport.

**Purpose / Meaning** - for some people the meaning they ascribe to their life is found through their spirituality, for others it might come through their work, or their relationships. Each of us is likely to feel the need to make sense of our own life and its purpose.

**Humour** - I've never seen this listed before as a category of importance in life, but I'm adding it in because it seems important to me. Having a good laugh helps us keep perspective, releases stress, helps us connect with others, and generally makes us feel better.



Identify the categories that matter to you, perhaps ranking them in order. Once you've done that, set aside time to evaluate how your time is currently apportioned. Do you allow sufficient time for creative thinking or to create something? Are you being adequately challenged intellectually or at work? Do you get enough sleep or satisfactorily prioritise eating well?

Allow yourself to dream of what life would look like if you didn't have obligations; this might give you insights into what matters most to you. Then identify ways in which, within current constraints, you're able to fulfil similar needs. For example, you might not be able to quit your job and travel to Europe to study painting, but you might be able to set aside time each week to dabble with paint or to attend weekend workshops.

Balance is not something that's achieved, but rather a process in which to engage. Remember that each week we get another 168 coins to invest! Enjoy the process of refining your life to nurture all the facets of you.

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*[Dr Kate Alessia](#) is a clinical psychologist and social worker with many years' experience of striving for balance in life, without yet attaining it. She enjoys working with people to help them create the life they want. Kate works in private practice in Hindmarsh.*

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