Throughout grad school, establishing a healthy work-life balance was a challenge. During a lab rotation, I listened with disbelief as the principal investigator (PI) told me he expected trainees to work 12-hour days 6 days per week. No one else appeared to be bothered by his demanding work routine. His trainees would regularly stay in the lab until midnight, only to return first thing the next morning. I started waking up as early as possible to get into the lab and demonstrate my dedication. But after 1 week, I knew that the research group, with its skewed approach to work-life balance, wasn’t for me.

For another rotation, I chose a group that had more reasonable working hours. The PI and other lab members went home for dinner, made time for family, and exercised regularly. Instead of racking up hours, they focused on being efficient with the time they dedicated to research. For the first time, I didn’t feel guilty for seeking a life outside the lab. Not long after, I signed on to stay in that lab for the rest of my Ph.D.

With my new PI’s support, I succeeded in staying productive while keeping reasonable work hours, regularly leaving the lab by 5 p.m. Yet, I often found myself thinking about work well into the evening. Instead of unwinding and cooking dinner, I would anxiously ruminate on my experiments. While watching TV, I would scroll through newly published scientific articles during commercial breaks. My conversations with family members and friends always seemed to gravitate toward my Ph.D. work. I realized that my habit of mindlessly checking my phone was key to my problem. In one instance, I opened an email containing peer-review feedback at 10:30 p.m. and instantly read through the detailed list of criticisms. No wonder I had a fitful sleep that night.

So I set a new boundary for myself: Only deal with work-related tasks—opening emails, reading journal articles—when I can give them my full attention. I began to push back on my habit of mindlessly reaching for my phone whenever I had a spare moment. Instead, I forced myself to stop and question whether the time was right. I also began to turn off my phone during some events, such as parties and family gatherings. Although it took time to develop better habits, I was pleased to find that this strategy cut down on anxious mind-whirling when I was trying to relax.

I also started to practice being mentally present during activities outside the lab. For instance, I found it helpful to go for an evening walk and try to notice the birds and flowers around me, a practice that drew me out of my thoughts and into my surroundings. It was challenging at first, but as my walk became a part of my daily rhythm, it became easier to ground myself and take these moments to recharge.

Now a postdoc, I still catch myself on occasion thinking about experiments when I’m trying to fall asleep at night. But I’m making progress toward being mentally present when I step away from my workspace. By bringing work-life balance to my inner world as well as my schedule, I hope to become a less anxious scientist, a more attentive husband, and a much happier wedding guest.

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