

SURF Mentor Conference: Balancing Multiple Demands

Presenter: Jarrett Ellington Psy.D., Staff Psychologist & Alcohol & Other Drugs Clinical Coordinator- Caltech Counseling Center

Today, we will be discussing the topic of Balancing Multiple Demands as a SURF mentor. The purpose of this discussion is to help you consider how you will spend your time as a mentor. The goal of this discussion is helping you “be productive” while also finding work/life balance. Today, I will discuss three skills that will support you in balancing multiple demands for your time as a mentor.

Skill # 1: Time Management

1. *Get a Baseline*- Getting a baseline is helpful in determining how you actually spend your time as you go throughout your work day. It is best to get a baseline by tracking/recording the time you spend on various activities throughout an *entire work week* (rather than just one day, b/c work days vary in terms of the type of work you are engaged in). Caveat: These activities can sometimes drain an excessive amount of time- It might be helpful to ask yourself- How much time do I spend on activities such as coffee breaks, bathroom breaks, surfing the internet, and social media?... While these activities are very common- to some degree, slightly reducing the time you spend on these activities can open up time for other activities such as physical exercise (recommended), checking in w/ loved ones (family, friends, etc.) Are there any other non-essential activities that I have not listed?....”stop and chats”
2. *Get a Planner/Organizer*- Planners are available at any office supply store. Being that we are in the digital age, planner/organizer software programs are available on most PC’s/Mac’s. Having a planner is especially helpful if much of your time is non-structured. We are all different: Some of us are 1- *internally motivated*: we thrive in unstructured time b/c we are very self-organized. 2- Some of us are *externally motivated*: we thrive with more externally- imposed structure. *Neither mode of motivation is more or less better, just different...* Understand what motivates you and leverage your style. For those that are externally motivated, having a planner/organizer is even more important- you will need to include meetings- both large and 1-on-1 in your schedule. You will need to include work deadlines and schedule time for a variety of different work-related items and projects.
3. *“To-do” list & Prioritize*- When we have a lot of work to accomplish, we can sometimes feel paralyzed. The first step might be creating a to-do list for the day or for the week. This list includes work-related tasks that are important. It is also helpful to prioritize these items b/c some are more or less important and/or time sensitive than others. It is important to keep a realistic to-do list. If your to-do list is too large, you may need to pare it down to a manageable size. If you are having trouble getting started, start with a smaller manageable task to get some “psychological momentum rolling”.
4. *Delegate*- In order to maximize your time and productivity, consider delegating some of work to those you supervise and trust with completing this work. This can be helpful for a number of reasons: 1- It allows you to focus on essential work activities. 2- Others value “feeling needed” and this can contribute to better work relationships and better communication about work-related items. Although this can be a difficult task for perfectionists/workaholics, this will lead to more balance in your work schedule.

5. *Be prepared*- If you are attending a meeting, consider the following questions: 1- Have I reviewed the necessary information for this meeting to be effective? 2- Is there a clear agenda for the meeting? 3- Who will be in attendance and is there some exchange of information that could help me make progress on my work or help others with their work? By preparing ahead of time, you can maximize the effectiveness of meetings. Also, two heads are better than one- sometimes colleagues are able to see things from a different perspective or lens and improve the quality of your work or offer other helpful suggestions.

Skill #2: Relational

Very few of us work in isolation. Much of our work involves collaborating with other individuals. With that being said, here are some “relational” skills that you can utilize to find more balance in your work & life.

1. *Learn how to say “no”*- Let’s admit it. Many of us are people-pleasers. We want to please others and feel valued. However, we often take on too much responsibility and thereby create undue stress. In your role as a mentor, it is important to ask: What are my responsibilities as a mentor? What does thriving look like in this position? Given the hierarchy of supervisor relationships, whom might I need to say “yes” to and how will I also set realistic boundaries with those I work with. Being a “Yes” person is a recipe for burnout and resentment. It is important to say “no” at times and set realistic boundaries around our work.
2. *Ask for help*- This can be quite difficult for many, namely due to pride. Here I would like to stress the idea of interdependence. Sometimes we are needed and sometimes we need others- and... that is okay! By asking for help, we can overcome barriers to our work, increase communication with colleagues, and help others “feel needed/valued”. Don’t let pride and stubbornness get in the way of your success.
3. *Communicate clearly and be assertive*- Be clear about information presented or requested. Be as concrete as possible. This will lead to less ambiguity and get people “on the same page”. Be assertive- that is, assert your own rights but also be respectful of others. Going to the extremes can lead to 1- Passive Communication- you devalue your own rights, thoughts, opinions and prioritize the rights, thoughts, and opinions of others, i.e. you don’t stick up for yourself. This can lead to frustration, resentment, and feeling “taken advantage of”. 2- Aggressive Communication- You devalue others rights, thoughts, and opinions. You fail to exhibit empathy. This can lead others to distance themselves from you or “just tolerate you”.

Skill #3: Self-Care

In many professions, especially the helping profession, we talk about the value of “self-care”. Unfortunately it is not often practiced. Crucial to work/life balance as a mentor is engaging in adequate self-care. Here are aspects of self-care that are worth attending to:

1. *The “Basic 3”*: Get enough sleep, eat well, and get some physical exercise. Although these are basic, enough can’t be said about making these a priority.

- a. Sleep: It is suggested that people get ~8 hours of sleep per night. We know, however, that each of us requires more or less depending on our unique needs. Being chronically “under-slept” can lead to increased stress, decreased cognitive functioning, emotional and physical health concerns, and on over-reliance on caffeine (Possibly other stimulants...) Drinking alcohol to excess can lead to REM suppression. Practice good sleep hygiene.
 - b. Eat well: Try to find a healthy balance in your diet. Stay away from lots of sugar as this can lead to large spikes and dips in blood sugar levels and impact your energy. Coffee can boost alertness, but too much can leave you feeling anxious and “wired”.
 - c. Exercise: Routine physical exercise has enormous benefits for the mind & body. It helps relieve stress and it is a mood booster. Cardiovascular exercise, weight lifting, and yoga are just a few examples that can promote these benefits. Caltech offers great exercise facilities and classes to students, post-docs, and staff members.
2. *Connect*- with family, friends, & coworkers. Remember, there is life outside of being a mentor. Also remember Maslow’s hierarchy of needs- we are social beings and we need our social needs met; we have a need for connection. Increased isolation can lead to increased unhappiness. Grab coffee with a friend, go out to lunch, or connect for “happy hour”- in moderation 😊 Enjoy the Pasadena surrounding area- take a stroll at Huntington library/gardens, get some FroYo in Old Town, or take a hike up Echo Mountain.
3. *Practice Mindfulness meditation*- By practicing mindfulness meditation, you can relieve stress, stay present-focused, and increase your focus. Basic exercise: Paying attention to your breath. You can get 10 free mindfulness meditations at [Headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com).
4. *Be flexible*- Don’t be too rigid with your schedule and allow for disruptions. Not everything goes as planned and being flexible will allow you to be more productive when work tasks shift or are re-prioritized. Being flexible can cut out a lot of frustration when your expectations aren’t met.
5. *Connect with your Purpose/Set an intention for the day*. Remind yourself why you are doing the work that you are doing. What motivates you about your work? What makes you enthusiastic about doing your work? Tune into this and set your intention for the day. Stay focused and limit distractions. Enjoy your work; make it a labor of love.