

# BALANCE

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## Secrets of Small Talk

While many people are not comfortable with small talk and business social events, willingness to engage in such activities can result in great connections and increased productivity. The secret is improving your engagement skills so that these activities are more relaxed and gratifying to you. Consider it an adventure! To prepare for such events, discard your dread, boost your enthusiasm and prepare a few conversational topics before your arrival. Focus on three categories:

- 1) Your location and immediate environment;
- 2) The purpose of the event; and
- 3) The event's anticipated outcome or result.

Apply who, what, where, when, how, and why questions to these topics. Numerous icebreakers can be formulated using these topics and question-word starters. Key point: Break the ice with questions. After a conversation starts, give your name. Offer your firm handshake and look the person in the eye. When introduced to others, repeat their names as you shake hands. Verbally affirm (“Uh-huh”) or nod your head to show interest, and look for opportunities to volley the conversation. Don't monopolize. When you employ these skills, new acquaintances will remember you as someone who's personable. Being a good conversationalist isn't something you can easily put on a résumé, but it is one skill that will boost your career dramatically.

## Staying Up During the Downturn

Financial worries create tremendous stress and can result in collateral damage to your health and personal relationships. Navigate today's rough economic seas by being willing to talk about your fears with your spouse or close friends. Don't beat yourself up over past mistakes. Review your household expenses and start cutting the fat. Add whatever you can to cash savings. Create a “worst-case scenario” plan. Make a pact with family members and friends to provide aid and support to one another, if needed. Take full advantage of your company's employee assistance program. Talking out concerns will often lead to new and useful solutions. Lean times are no fun, but historically, they may lead to helping you reorganize your priorities and make needed course corrections for the future when the next economic down cycle returns. Use your leaner entertainment budget to find creative, family-oriented activities that don't cost money. If hiring freezes exist, consider looking for ways to expand your influence and productivity. This storm, like others, will pass, but with perseverance and a positive attitude, you'll emerge from it stronger.



## Go Natural in Your Spring Cleaning

Don't cart a cornucopia of harsh chemicals into your home when a few common household products are all you need to make your home sparkle this spring. For a general cleaner and disinfectant, just mix 1 cup of borax with 1 gallon of warm water. Create window cleaner by combining 2 tablespoons of white vinegar with 1 quart of warm water. Mix equal parts vinegar and warm water for tub and tile cleaner, and use baking soda for scouring. Clean your toilet bowl with 1 part baking soda to 4 parts vinegar. For dishwashing detergent, go with equal parts borax and baking soda. You can use this combo for the laundry, too. If you'd rather avoid the work, you can buy your green products at many specialized, earth-friendly websites.

## Slay the Energy Vampires

Are energy vampires invading your home? Anything in your house that's plugged in is busy wasting energy, even when not in use. Up to 5 percent of your energy bill, according to the U.S. Energy Department, is from these devices. The worst offenders are your television, VCR and computer, but the little things add up too. Your best defense? Pull the plug. Especially on things you rarely use like the hedge trimmer recharging in the garage in mid-January. For more savings, only buy new appliances that have the Energy Star label, and use a power strip for appliances with a lot of peripheral devices so you can shut down everything at once after you've finished.

## Time Logs

A time log is a tool to track how you spend your time during the work day. Logging time can be tedious but it provides powerful insight into work efficiencies. You will quickly see how valuable your time is, and become more willing to plug the "time leaks" from nonproductive, unnecessary tasks that reduce your efficiency. Think you're too busy to keep a time log? Then you're more in need of one than you know.

## Answers for Tough Teenage Questions

Is your youngster an expert at catching you off guard with tough, uncomfortable questions? These questions often start out with "Mom (or Dad), did you ever...?" "What if..." "What happens when...?" Do you think these questions over so you can deliver an effective answer later, or do you throw out the first thought that comes to your mind in the hopes that honesty and directness will trump all? It can be a tough call. It's okay to tell your teen that you'd like time to consider the question, and then schedule a time when you can follow up. When faced with difficult or uncomfortable subjects, don't hesitate to seek help with answers or how to answer them. One comprehensive resource is [www.4parents.gov](http://www.4parents.gov), which is a website that addresses issues such as teen sex, risky youth behaviors, and other thorny topics. Once you've researched your answer and approach, be sure to follow up on your commitment to talk things over. Don't be tempted to dismiss your teen's question with relief if perhaps it was forgotten. It wasn't. Your child may not ask it again, and instead go to a less credible source for the wrong answer.

## Your Heart Needs to Sleep it Off

You know that poor sleep makes you cranky and adversely affects your energy level and concentration, but it may also increase your risk of heart disease. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that more sleep leads to reduced coronary artery calcification (a predictor of future heart disease) with every extra hour of sleep, lowering the odds of calcification by about 33 percent. If you are suffering from chronic sleep troubles, talk to your doctor. Source: 2008 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 300, pages 2859-2866.

## Helping Your Child “Think College”

If you value a college education for your child, the secret to implanting the idea is “expectation” and “anticipation.” Start imparting messages in middle school rather than high school. Treat college attendance as a natural and assumed event in your child’s life. Help your child envision the experience by visiting different campuses and talking about the benefits and drawbacks of each. Don’t push too hard for early decisions on a major. Instead, talk about different career options and how they fit in with your child’s strengths and interests. Discuss how making good grades and securing scholarships today gives your child more options down the road. If you’re a graduate, share some of your own college experiences with a sense of excitement and explain how they helped shape your life.

## Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

Success almost always requires stepping out of your comfort zone. The next time your anxieties start clawing at your willingness to explore a new workplace opportunity, remember that it’s natural to feel unfit for a task at first. Expect to fumble until you get your footing. False starts and dead ends happen. Don’t be discouraged. Follow this rule: You know more than you think you do. The key is applying old experiences to new situations, getting feedback, and making adjustments until you excel.

## Take a Break

Treat your work like a marathon rather than a sprint and you’ll get more done in less time. Start by warming up with a few easy tasks, and slowly increase your pace until you hit a comfortable rhythm. Take frequent, short breaks. If you don’t, you will experience fatigue followed by vulnerability to distractions. This is your body’s way of saying “Enough!” These distractions can morph into procrastination, which will usually keep you away from work longer than planned breaks would.

## Hidden Motivators for Exercise

You know you should exercise, but keeping your body physically fit may not be motivating you to participate regularly in exercise. Acquiring more positive beliefs about exercise will give you more reasons to do it, and you may feel new motivation. See exercise as a form of recreation, a way to apply work-life balance, and a means of achieving the goal of finding mental relaxation. Exercising will produce a tranquilizing effect that you will feel hours later, and it can give you the feeling that you accomplished something. These effects can be especially beneficial if you’ve had a hard day. Exercise can be the one bright spot during those times where you feel a sense of helplessness about specific worries and concerns. Don’t think of exercise as just something you “have to do.” Instead, think of its many other benefits.

## Kick Cravings to Keep Your Diet

Don’t beat yourself up for failing to slay the craving goblins in the psychological war against hunger. Ironically, the solution may be your need to eat more frequently. If you reduce caloric intake too quickly, a starvation/binge cycle can begin. Set realistic goals for dieting, and ease into it. Do you need more sleep? Exhaustion can make you want high-calorie foods. Also, eat breakfast. If you don’t, you risk overeating at lunch or later in the day. If you aren’t hungry first thing in the morning, head out the door with something nutritious in hand that you can eat on the way to or at work. Stress can be a trigger for binges, so manage it with help from your EAP. If possible, try short exercise breaks. One study showed that a brisk walk could overcome chocolate cravings. It could help reduce other food cravings as well.



## Work With Your Moods

You can get in sync with your body and be more productive during the week by learning how natural sleep-wake cycles affect your energy level and emotions. Here's how: Jot down how you're feeling every hour during the day. Use a five-point scale where "1" equals low energy and "5" equals feeling peppy. Keep score for a week and when finished, analyze your findings. Did you discover your "up" times and your "not so up" times? You have a natural biological clock inside you that regulates everything from hormone levels to appetite. These circadian rhythms are found in almost every living thing. Once you're familiar with your unique pattern, predicting the best time to work, study, and learn is easier. You'll know when you're likely to be energetic, positive, and upbeat so you can do more, think more clearly, and process information better. Use this knowledge when planning important tasks and watch your productivity skyrocket!

## Give Yourself an Incentive to Lose Weight

It appears that financial incentives to lose weight do work, at least in the short run. Motivation might be boosted with a financial award that you plan for yourself if you succeed or a financial penalty if you don't. This approach was duplicated in a University of Pennsylvania study in which some winners chose the forfeit money route, while others went for the award. At the end, 50 percent of participants succeeded in losing 16 pounds in 16 weeks.

To speak with an EAP professional,  
please call: **866.598.3978**

