The art of triage

I enrolled in my Ph.D. program 3 years ago, intent on a quick completion. But between drop-offs, pickups, and unscheduled days off, my candidature time was rapidly melting away. So, after a few months, and with the support of my supervisors, I decreased to a 70% time appointment and periodically took unpaid leave. Life became more manageable, my research progressed, and I was happy with the balance I had achieved.

Then, about a year ago, everything was thrown into disarray again when a stalled literary project lurched back to life. I was offered a publishing contract for a memoir describing a camping trip through the Australian Outback that my husband and I took a few months after he became a paraplegic. I could not pass up the opportunity to challenge perceptions of those with disabilities. I met with my supervisors, dropped to 50% time, and worked on both my research and memoir—which I recently completed.

I've learned to balance my personal and professional lives like a nurse triaging emergency patients: by determining which role requires my attention right now. Borrowing an analogy from author James Patterson, I imagine that I am juggling a set of balls representing work, family, friends, and spirit. Each ball is made of either rubber or glass, and the material changes with the circumstances. If I drop a rubber ball, it bounces back. However, a fumbled glass ball may chip or even shatter. The trick is knowing when a ball is rubber and when it's glass.

Even with this mindset, at times my expectations are unrealistic, resulting in stress, anxiety, and fears that I'm failing at everything. Because of lecture schedules, I missed concerts where my kids sang while dressed as rare earth metals.

After my son fell off the monkey bars, I spent the night in the hospital instead of presenting at a long-anticipated conference. I craft elegant emails to my supervisors, explaining why my research has not progressed as far as I'd promised. Meanwhile, my kids' teachers barely recognize me, dust bunnies the size of cats blow through my hallway, and we are having grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner—again.

But I am striving to achieve balance. That means accepting that my academic hydrogeology career is unlikely to surge forth like a wave, and that on some days I will spend more time discussing Otto, the picture book fish out of water, than what happens to actual living fish when we pump out all the water. Academia is often seen as a single-minded pursuit: all or nothing, publish or perish. But progress at a creep is still progress. As difficult as it is to watch the careers of my peers accelerate past mine, it is clear they are on a different course.

I'm grateful to my supervisors for their openness to finding solutions so that we can achieve our mutual research—and life—goals. But I know that others facing similar dilemmas lack such support. More supervisors need to be willing to accept part-time students who have other priorities—and who often bring unique experiences, perspectives, and skills to their research. Universities need to provide flexibility for students who have additional commitments and responsibilities, be it employment, health, or family. I love being a Ph.D. student, but it does not need to come at the expense of the other parts of my life.

Emma White is a Ph.D. student at the University of Melbourne in Australia and the author of Broken.
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Science 357 (6351), 618.
DOI: 10.1126/science.357.6351.618

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