

Dynamic Balance

How to Be Active, Engaged, and Energized without Burnout

by Kraig Brockschmidt, November 2007

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“How do I maintain balance in my life?”

“How do I sustain a high level of energy?”

“How do I relax without just crashing in front of the TV?”

These common questions reflect the fact that just about everyone desires to be active and energetic. No matter their age or vocation, people generally want to be able to stay engaged, to be consistently productive, and to fully enjoy both work and play alike for many years to come. Few, surely, desire to have *less* energy!

Most of us also recognize that the quality of that energy is important. We’re not necessarily looking for an increase of frenetic or agitated energy. Too much restlessness, like too much caffeine, eventually leads to such over-stimulation that some period of non-stimulation—that is, ‘crashing’—becomes absolutely necessary. Thus we understand that some kind of *balance* is necessary for sustainable renewal and restoration.

Unfortunately, most of our experience with ‘being energetic’ involves the restless, frenzied sort of activities, so much so that many of our so-called ‘vacations’ or ‘recreational’ activities are anything but relaxing or restorative. The common understanding of balance, then, is somewhat one-dimensional: it’s thought of in terms of *active vs. passive*, or of *effort vs. non-effort*.

(This, incidentally, is probably why TV is so popular. According to The Bureau of Labor and Statistics, [see <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t12.htm>] American citizens watch TV for an average of about 2.5 hours per day; other institutes, such as A.C. Nielsen, Co., place it higher, up to 4 hours a day. That’s quite a bit of passive time, in any case.)

To put it graphically, our typical sense of balance has activity on one end and passivity on the other (Figure A).

In this there is a sense of balance. Unfortunately, it’s inherently unstable. Our desire to be energetically engaged in life drives us toward the right (activity),

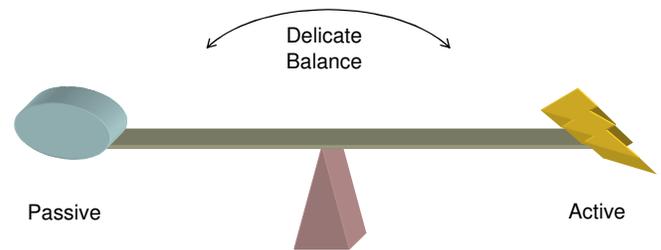


Figure A

while our physiological reality drives us toward the left (passivity). Thus we see-saw back and forth, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, shifting back and forth trying to find the one (hopefully) calm and stable point in the middle where we can rest. No matter how skilled we might become at shifting, however, finding and maintaining that rest point proves nearly impossible. And such a state of perpetual tension can only lead, ultimately, to exhaustion and burnout. Sooner or later, this tenuous balance will fail, and it will take some time, as you’ve surely experienced, to recover enough strength to try again. Such seems our common fate.

Yet it’s clearly not *universal*. In fact, you probably know someone who doesn’t share this experience of life, someone who seems constantly active and engaged without the constant tension, someone for whom the ‘inevitable’ crash doesn’t even seem part of their reality.

What, then, is their secret?

As I related in my book *Mystic Microsoft*, being immersed in the most intense growth years of the world’s leading software company brought this question into my everyday awareness. While burnout was everywhere—many employees didn’t last more than a few years—others seemed to thrive in ‘The Velvet Sweatshop’ (as one reporter called it) for five, ten, fifteen years, or longer.

What I observed was that those who burned out were the ones that kept swinging, like I’ve described, between active and passive: they’d work long, hard hours, sometimes sleeping in their offices, or when they went home they’d just watch TV. If you could

get them to take vacation, they'd simply go somewhere and 'chill' on a beach or such, where hopefully their nervous systems got at least a few hours' break before they had to return to work.

Those who thrived, on the other hand, worked just as hard but also *played* energetically. It's like what biographer James C. Hume wrote of Winston Churchill:

Like a farmer who rotates his crops for more productivity, he alternated his pen and brush. After a stint of painting, Churchill found he could return to his study revived. The secret to his titanic output was in no small way this rhythmic rotation from library to landscape. As he explained in *Painting as a Pastime*, 'Change is the master key. A man can wear out a particular part of his mind by continually using it and tiring just in the same way as he can wear out the elbows of a coat by rubbing the frayed elbow; but the tired part of the mind can be rested and strengthened, not by merely rest, but by using other parts.' (From *Eisenhower and Churchill*, Prima Publishing, 2001, p.111)

What Churchill discovered, as did my Microsoft colleagues, was that balance can be found in another *dimension* than just active/passive, namely, the dimension of *qualities*. That is, instead of balancing activity and passivity, they remained highly energetic by wholly engaging in different *kinds* of activities that complement one another (Figure B).

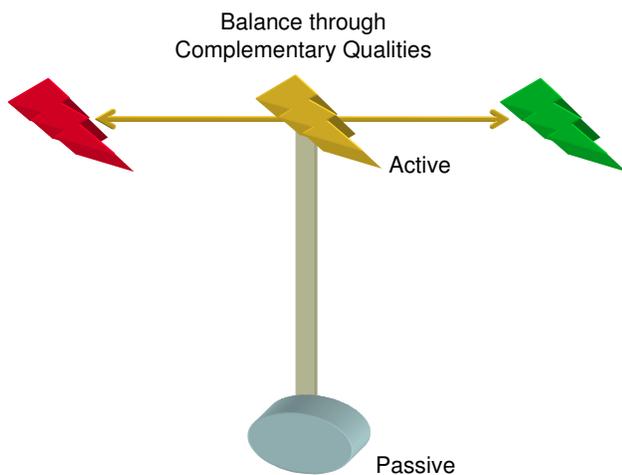


Figure B

Now you might ask, is this not just as unstable as Figure A? It does look that way. But here is where we must depart from the static image of a scale, for we're talking about the balance of *energy* which is, by nature, something *dynamic*. It's not a state of non-activity, or a passive peace, but a state of en-

gaged activity that yet produces renewal and restoration. As Churchill said, one part of himself was rested while another part was active.

To understand how this works, consider the qualities involved in his two main activities.

Churchill's role as Prime Minister of England during World War II was very people-oriented and inherently concerned with conflict, negotiation, and compromise. It was 'big' and 'significant' to the Grand Scheme of Things, concerned with the life and death of nations. It was very detail-oriented and left-brained, full of endless minutiae of countless logistical problems and strategic decisions. Its reality was also primary indoors, oftentimes in stuffy halls or secret subterranean bunkers without the air-conditioning systems we enjoy today.

Painting, on the other hand, had nothing to do with people; as Churchill described, he could furiously lash the canvas as much as he wanted and it wouldn't hit back. In painting, he could do whatever he wanted, no questions asked, and no matter what he did, it was utterly insignificant to the rest of the world. Nobody would die from his artistic decisions and, like most art forms, it was much more of a right-brained activity that he could also do outdoors or in front of an open window.

So those parts of his being that were strained through statesmanship were rested while he painted. Those parts that were utilized in painting were rested during times of statesmanship. With this awareness he understood that in every moment, no matter what the activity, there was always a state dynamic balance within himself. For few activities, if any, demand our whole being.

To generalize this principle so that you can apply it to your own lives, the secret of dynamic balance is to find for yourself a set of energetic activities that complement each other qualitatively. Here's a simple process:

1. Identify your primary duties and obligations—those activities that are unavoidable in your life. This will generally include your job, your family responsibilities, and anything else that, for whatever reason, is a given structure in your life at present. Three or four items is plenty; you may only have one or two.
2. For each item in (1), identify the main qualities of that activity. That is, describe it's "reality" by identifying its primary types of concern or orientation, the direc-

tions of focus, and what they demand of you physically, mentally, and emotionally.

3. For each quality in (2), now identify the complementary or balancing quality. Condense these words into a shorter list if there are redundancies.
4. Now look at the list of qualities from (3). What specific activities would involve and/or express some or all those qualities? That is, what activities could you energetically engage in that would, by their nature, completely balance the demands of your duties and responsibilities?

Here's an example. A woman in a class I once taught on this subject was employed in data-entry for medical billing. The reality of this job was that she sat for most of the day looking at a small computer screen and pouring over details. Precision was paramount; there was very little human interaction or communication; productivity was measured by the volume of claims she could process each day. Expressed as qualities, we have:

Sitting, lack of motion
Small visual focus
Detail-oriented, mental
Precise or demanding careful attention
Indoors
Isolated
Efficiency-oriented, constant energy

As she herself found (which was why she was in my class), watching TV wasn't a good balance. While it wasn't 'work,' it still involved *many of the same qualities*: sitting, a small visual focus, and isolation. It didn't necessarily need efficiency or precision, yet many programs still demand attention to details, even if only to follow a plotline. In short, watching TV was only perhaps 20% balancing to her work.

Now let's follow step 3 and identify the balancing qualities to those above:

Sitting, lack of motion	⇒	Standing, moving
Small visual focus	⇒	Wide visual focus
Detail-oriented	⇒	Flow-oriented, intuitive
Precise or demanding careful attention	⇒	Carefree, diffuse
Indoors	⇒	Outdoors
Isolated	⇒	Interpersonal, communicative, relating
Efficiency-oriented, constant energy	⇒	Experience-oriented, short bursts of intensity

What kinds of activities, then, would express the qualities in the second column? How about dance, especially artistic and group dance (without too many rules or specific forms)? Hiking in nature is another option. Other outdoor activities and sports can work too, like boating or kayaking; even team sports (including those indoors) can work since the rules one has to follow don't need to be complex. And certainly there are many other possibilities.

You see? Any number of activities can engage 75% or more of the balancing qualities. Others, like Churchill's painting, might satisfy fewer, yet still be balancing if one's other activities complete the scene, so to speak. (Painting has a small canvas, is usually solitary, and often done seated, but can be done outside and standing.) Other factors might come into play as well, of course, such as the realities and interests of friends and family members, or one's physical limitations.

Whatever the case, balancing all of your activities in the quality dimension while keeping actively engaged in them gives the answer to those questions we started with: a dynamic yet relaxed balance that can be sustained throughout a lifetime.