

Taking My Own Advice



In my job as a school counselor, I meet with high school students every day who struggle to balance the demands of their lives. I listen intently and guide them through strategies to use to help find contentment. But as I switch hats from my day job to my job as a mom to two young boys and a wife to a husband with MS, I often seem to forget to take my own advice.

Since my husband's journey with MS began in 2015, I've struggled to balance. I worry about everyone all the time and forget to worry about myself.

Last year, I took a leave of absence from my counseling position to focus on myself and family after hitting what felt like a real breaking point. Now that I'm back at work, I'm facing the same challenges I did two years ago, but now I'm more focused on ways to overcome them.

And so, to help me find balance in my life, I try to recall the advice that I offer my students in school. To them, and now myself, I say:

1. **Do what you need to do to get by.** There are some days that our boys eat dinner on the couch or that I have to use the grocery delivery service because I can't get to the store. Each day presents different challenges, and sometimes the remedy is giving a little bit of time to ourselves. This is a hard lesson for me to accept, with all the pressure to be "not be that parent," but our life is **our** life, and we have to do what works.
2. **Be honest with others with what you can and can't do.** At the end of a long week of working and parenting, my husband and I have to do some math on whether it's possible to go out to a last-minute get together with friends and family. We've both

tried to be more honest with others when those invitations come in to help reduce that stigma, and it's helped us avoid being overextended and overwhelmed.

3. **Take care of yourself.** You can't be much use to anyone, or effective in any task, if you don't first pay attention to yourself. Again, this one is hard for most of us (raising my own hand as guilty here), but I've often come back to this as the Golden Rule of being a caregiver. My husband and kids are no better off if I'm stressed and tired from being everything to everyone. A 30-minute "time out" has done more for me most days than I would have ever expected before MS impacted our life.
4. **Let others take on some of the things that you think you alone can do.** Since his diagnosis, I felt a strong need to protect my husband and remove extra stress and duty from him, especially in parenting and housekeeping. While he sometimes benefited from a restful day, it also denied him opportunities to contribute to our life and home. And so now when he offers to take the boys out for an afternoon or to stay up late to finish the laundry, I let him. I now see that it benefits him to be active and able to do all of the things. From his perspective, as long as he can and wants to do those things, it's important for me to remember as a caregiver.

These few reminders are sometimes very hard to remember in the hectic flow of life as an MS caregiver, but I find them helpful to recall even every so often. In every day, though, I try to tell myself that tomorrow is a new day and a new opportunity to change, reset, grow and move forward.

That is one certainty that we have in this uncertain reality of ours, and for that, I am thankful.