

How shoulds affect how we see things

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August 27, 2014

My search for the last year has been around finding balance, and it is the topic for the next retreat I am leading. And my experiences over the last year have been full of not only searching for balance, but also in trying to define what balance would look like.

And here's what I wonder: is balance the choice to actively juggle every ball that is thrown my way and keep everything moving?

Or is balance really about defining boundaries, making choices about what is best for myself and my family, learning to say "no" to things that don't work (or no longer work), and finding an equilibrium between the shoulds and the want tos?

Recently, I've come to define balance as the latter. Balance is an active choice. It's deciding what works, what a person wants, what one needs in her life. And it's about walking away from things that don't work.

Truly, a lot of the wrong things are the same thing as what I've labeled as shoulds. This is the stuff that each of us thinks we should do, often without a specific reason or notion as to why we should do it. For me, it's often the vague, nagging sense that society expects it of me, or is judging me against a mythical woman who does everything she should.

*I should stay in a career like project management and stay the course with my job because I have a child and a family and it would be unwise to risk our stability.*

*I should have a second child (or get a dog, or both) because my son needs a playmate or is lonely, or because families should have two children.*

*I should be able to do everything—keep a clean house, cook, get groceries, do laundry, exercise, and sleep eight hours a night.*

For me, chasing all of these shoulds and wrong things often goes hand-in-hand in the search for balance. And for that reason, I've come to realize that the word

*balance* is often used as another word that is similar to the word perfection. It's another way that we end up judging ourselves, because we think we should balance everything.

Instead, though, balance is about finding a good mix of what a person longs to do and a way to make a living doing that. It's not about doing all of the things, but about doing the right things. It's not about going for broke emotionally or physically. It's about making brave choices about what one wants to do with her life.

Part of my journey for the last year has been looking at each of my shoulds and mindfully determining if it's still a fit, if it's do-able, if it has a place in my life. I've replaced quite a few of them with things that fit me now, and things that feel truthful. I'm still in the middle of it. The three shoulds from above had turned into something closer to these:

*I will stay in my current job for now and move into something more entrepreneurial over the next few years. I'll create a solid plan for myself and my family so it's not a huge risk, and Sean and I will make an educated decision together to except any risks that it entails.*

*We might get a dog in the next few years because Zoom would like one. We will wait until he's old enough to help care for an animal. A fish has been a good place to start.*

*I can't do everything, and that is OK. The house is clean-ish. Sean cooks dinner and I do breakfast. We often have groceries delivered because we prefer to spend the time as a family on weekends. I'm aiming for around 10,000 steps a day and I'm working on getting more sleep.*

It's been a real learning experience for me, turning shoulds around and questioning them. I like that my idea of balance has changed. It's manageable. I'm less anxious about it, and I've stopped worrying so much.

If you're struggling with balance, it might be worth writing down all of your internally assigned shoulds, and listing all of the things you're trying to juggle. Are they all things that you chose to own? Are some of them items that you took on because society, your family, your friends thought you should do? Write them out and give yourself some time to think on them, and then decide what you might be able to let go or rewrite.

Originally posted at [Welcoming Spirit](#)