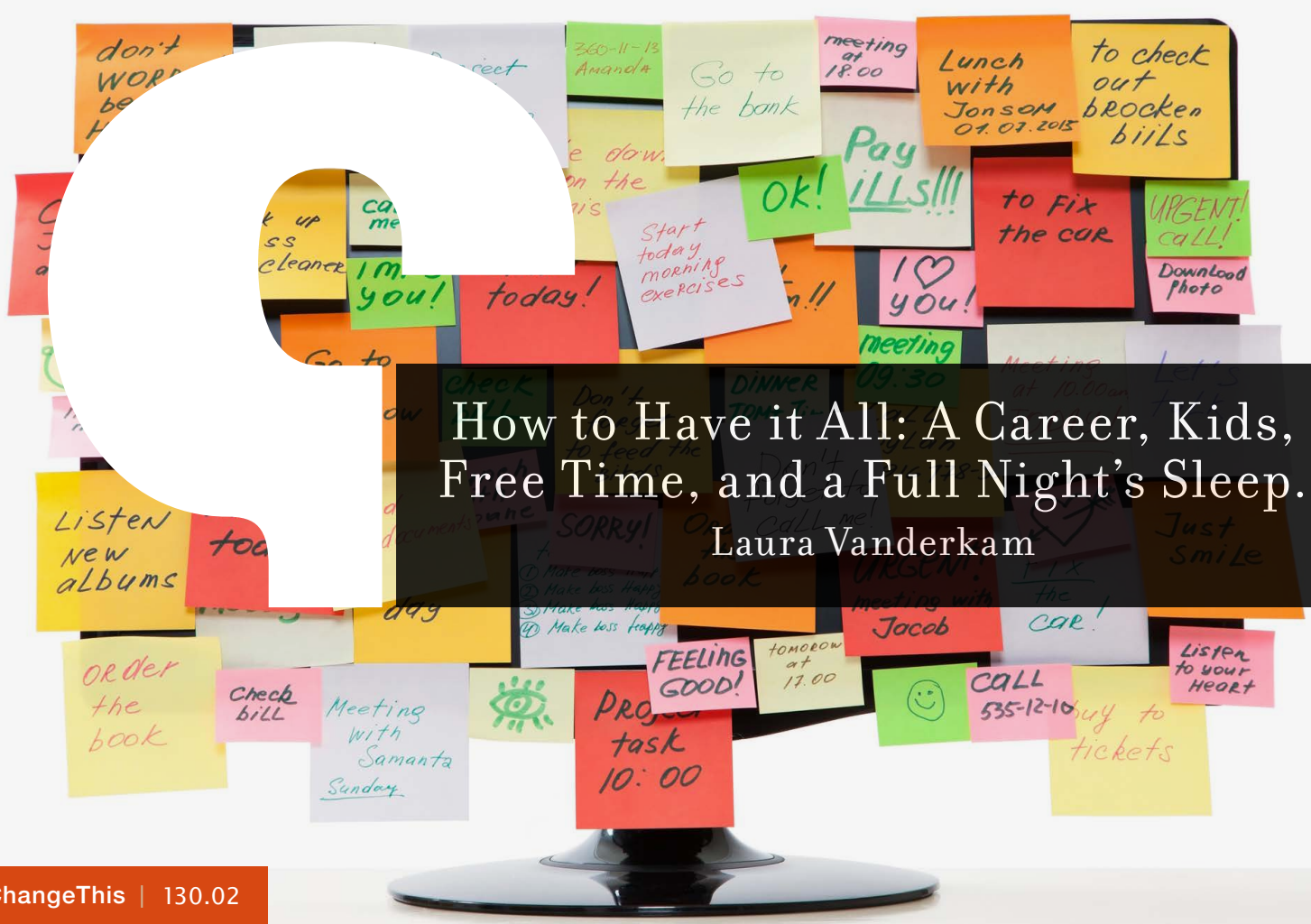

How to Have it All: A Career, Kids, Free Time, and a Full Night's Sleep.

Laura Vanderkam

The week before I wrote this was a busy one.

I worked north of 50 hours, including several hours on the weekend. I spent two nights away from home for work travel. The upside of being gone overnight was that it bought me a respite from my 3 month old baby, who often wakes to eat between 4 and 5 a.m. I handled that wake up the remaining 5 nights. I had other family responsibilities too; I have four kids under the age of eight. Did I mention my husband traveled for work as well?

And yet my life isn't a hyper-scheduled march from one duty to another. It isn't all work and sleep deprivation. That week had space for fun kid time: kicking a soccer ball with the boys, discussing whatever topics fascinated my 7-year-old as we waited for the bus, reading to my 3-year-old's preschool class and talking to them about what it was like to be an author. I had dinner with an old friend; I sang karaoke with newer ones. I re-read Mrs. Dalloway. I ran a 10-mile race with my husband (well, the first 6 miles of it; he's faster than I am). I even slept enough despite my 5 a.m. wake ups because I usually hit the sack by 10 p.m., and snoozed after getting the baby back down.

I like to think I'm a good steward of my hours—I write and speak about time management for a living!—but in terms of having space for what matters to me, I'm far from the only one. The popular narrative about women, work, and life is full of what I call "Recitations of Dark Moments": these lamentations about missed soccer games, or waking up at 5:15 a.m. to do laundry. They imply that working motherhood requires becoming some maxed out mess. And yet the reality is that women with big careers have far more balanced lives than the popular narrative conveys. That's good news for anyone wondering if it's possible to have a career, kids, free time, and even a full night's sleep. It *is* possible to have it all, not just in theory, but in how we live our day-to-day lives.

That's my conclusion from studying women's schedules. Several years ago, I wrote a book called *168 Hours*, and one result of that was that numerous companies asked me to come speak about efficiency and productivity with their teams. Some of these companies were known for their long hours. To make my talks more informative, I'd ask a few people to keep track of their time beforehand, ideally for a week. I'd study these records of 168 hours so I could offer advice on specific challenges. While I speak to all sorts of groups, often the women's networking group at the companies where I spoke would sponsor the event. Many of my time logs, therefore, came from the senior women who led these groups. Many of these women had kids. And over time, I came to notice something: *Their lives didn't look that bad.*

Perhaps it speaks to the prevalence of negative narratives that I wondered if I'd see chaos, or maybe that scene from Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* novel of the executive distressing pies to make them look homemade, but nope. I saw some stressful moments, sure. I saw early flights and late nights. I saw days upended by sick kids or traffic jams, but I also saw relaxed kid time, husband time, exercise, girlfriend get-togethers, and a rather surprising amount of shut-eye.

It seems many women were quietly making life work. Still, whenever I heard Recitations of Dark Moments, I had only my impressions, and the slowly accumulating pile of time logs, to point to. I wanted better data. The best way to get data, I decided, was to produce some.

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So in 2013-2014 I recruited participants for what I began calling the Mosaic Project (more on that title in a minute). I asked women who made at least $100,000 a year, and had at least one kid at home, to keep track of their time for a week. While this definition of "having it all" is certainly debatable, it provided objective criteria, which I felt a study should generally have. I had these women record when they worked, slept, had family time, exercised, read, watched TV, etc. A researcher and I crunched numbers from the first 143 complete, 7-day logs I received, totaling 1001 days. (I eventually got many more, but I looked at data from those 1001 days. A time log is generally more accurate than simply asking people how many hours they devote to different activities, for reasons I talk about below). I wanted to know what the lives of people who had it all really looked like.

The answer is that they looked pretty reasonable. The women in my study worked more than 40 hours per week, but not that much more. They averaged 44 hours on their time logs. They also slept a reasonable amount: 54 hours per week. That's the equivalent of sleeping 7 hours and 43 minutes per day. There was some sleep deprivation, but it wasn't widespread. Almost 90 percent of logs featured at least the 7-9 hours per day public health types recommend, averaged over the entire week. While one might note that people do try to make up sleep on the weekend, I looked at individual days as well, and found that only 19 percent of the 1001 days featured fewer than 7 hours of sleep.

There are 168 hours in a week. If you work 44 hours and sleep 54, that leaves 70 hours for other things. Not surprisingly, the women in my study were able to have full personal lives during these 70 non-working, waking hours. Why not? It's the equivalent of 10 hours per day!

So where does the image of the overstressed, harried mom with the big job and family come from? I think there are two things going on. One is that people in general have faulty ideas of how they spend their time. Unless you get paid by the hour, you probably don't know exactly how many hours you work, and in a world where we all want to be seen as hard working, we have a tendency to round up. Likewise, in a world where sleep deprivation is seen as a badge of honor, we have a tendency to round down, and see the worst nights as "typical." People answer surveys with these exaggerated answers, which leads journalists to write stories about how Americans are increasingly overworked, even though time diaries show that the average work-week has declined over the past two generations. Likewise, the American Time Use Survey, which has researchers talk respondents through the previous day, rather than asking how much people work, sleep, or do housework, finds that the average American sleeps 8.74 hours a day. Sure, that includes teens and retirees. But consider this: according to the American Time Use Survey, the average employed mother with a kid under age 6 sleeps 8.47 hours per day. Sleep and work tend to be inversely correlated, and since the women in my study worked more than average, it follows that they slept less than average. But 54 hours per week—the equivalent of 8 hours for

5 days and 7 hours for 2 days—is still a decent amount. Getting enough sleep isn't just possible, it's the norm.

The second problem is one of how we structure our stories. We tend to tell our stories as points of evidence leading to an epiphany, which is an "a ha" moment when you realize that something needs to change. Dark moments have a tendency to stand out more than positive ones. Consequently, when our lives contain stressful moments, which they will, we remember them. We add them up. My busy week contained a few: I attempted to lead a meeting of a non-profit board I serve on by phone one night when I was by myself with the kids with no childcare. I kept apologizing and muting the phone when the baby fussed. When I showed up at my daughter's school at 9 a.m. to read, I found out they weren't expecting me to read until 10:30, so the morning's work plans needed to shift fast. A long-time employee told me she was moving on. To be sure, those are the stressful moments in a life that is very privileged and flexible. I am well aware that many women have much tougher lives. That's true in the broader world, and even within the rarefied realms of the Mosaic Project's criteria. I studied a number of single moms. Women had children with special needs. Nothing I write should be construed as an argument that society doesn't have a lot more to do to be supportive of working parents. Nonetheless, the general tendency when we get several stressful moments in a chain is to start seeing a pattern and begin marching toward the conclusion: life is crazy.

But what if we chose to view life differently? This brings us to the mosaic image. The first time I kept a time log, it felt a little strange to shoehorn my existence into an Excel spreadsheet. How could life be represented by cells on a grid? But over time, I came to see that I could view myself as the artist deciding on those cells. I became a mosaic maker, carefully placing tiles. By thinking about the arrangement, and watching others, and trying different strategies, over time I could create an intricate and satisfying pattern. I could create a mosaic that embraced new things: new opportunities in my working life, the new children whose lives I've loved watching unfold. A mosaic has many cells. Some are stressful, but those moments are just part of the mosaic. There are other moments too, such as seeing the book my daughter made so she could be like Mommy, belting out "My Heart Will Go On" in karaoke, and re-reading my favorite passage in *Mrs. Dalloway*: "Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life."

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This is the nature of this infinite richness: life is complex and compelling. Life is stressful and life is wonderful. There is no contradiction here. When you embrace the mosaic mindset, you realize that you do already have it all. You just have to choose to look.

To be sure, making the most of one's mosaic does require some strategy. While there may be space for progress at work, a satisfying personal life, and restorative personal care, I found that women often had to move around the tiles of their mosaics in order to make things work. They combined the need to work long hours and the desire to see their kids by working "split shifts"—leaving work at a reasonable hour, hanging out with family, and then going back to work for an hour or so after the kids went to bed. Some made the most of early morning hours: getting in a workout, or preserving space for family breakfast if family dinner wasn't in the cards. Some took the wise approach of letting stuff that doesn't matter go. Dishes can sit in the sink and kids can re-wear their favorite shirts, even if they don't get washed. People worked on weekends sometimes, often because it bought them shorter hours during the week.

Not everyone would want to use these strategies, but in the context of these women's lives, these strategies worked. They were able to spend lots of time with their families and work enough hours to advance. They enjoyed leisure time and got enough sleep too. **That happy balance is not some myth. It's often the reality of women's lives.**

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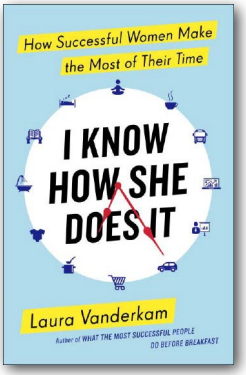

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Laura Vanderkam is the bestselling author of *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*, *All the Money in the World*, *168 Hours*, and *Grindhopping*. She is a frequent contributor to *Fast Company*'s website and a member of *USA Today*'s board of contributors. Her work has also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, and other publications. She lives with her husband and their four children outside Philadelphia.

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