

MODULE 2

## Work/Life Transition



Being new at any job is exciting, but also very stressful. As a returner, you have a wealth of experience, but you don't yet know how the role has changed since you left. Plus, you are making not one, but two transitions. As you transition back into career-mode, there are inevitably major adjustments to the home routine as well – especially if you still have caregiving duties to attend to.

As a result, you may be feeling an array of emotions – confidence, ambiguity, excitement, anxiety – some conflicting and maybe all at the same time. Though it may seem as though elements of your new life are out of your control, all these feelings are totally normal and valid. Outside of your professional purview, there are many other factors that contribute to a positive returnship experience. The key to managing all these moving parts is focusing on concrete ways to control what you can. This guide will discuss ways to manage or even overcome these obstacles.

“Simply changing my words from ‘I don’t have time for that’ to ‘That’s not a priority for me’ has completely changed the way that I organize my life. Actually, the way I live my life.”

– Laura Vanderkam



## Work + Life = Balance?

With the home routine changing, the road ahead can feel uncertain. Perhaps home duties have gone by the wayside or it feels like there just aren't enough hours in a day to keep everything clean and functional, and everyone happy and comfortable.

### Do the following statements apply to you?

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I feel guilty for spending less time with caretaking/household duties or burdening other people in my life with more responsibilities. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I feel so much more physically tired than I anticipated.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I have missed or forgotten a key responsibility of mine because I was so preoccupied.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Some days I have it all together, and other days I feel lost and overwhelmed by everything.  |

It is crucial to remember that your return to work isn't over after your first day – it's a process. Achieving balance is something we all strive for, when in fact, a better word to use instead of balance is "integration." The idea here is that the word "balance" may imply that work and life are completely separate and always in competition with each other. Integration supports the idea that having a fulfilling personal life is actually helpful to your professional one. So where to begin?

Well, remember what they tell you in the safety video on airplanes? You put your own oxygen mask on before helping others. There's no doubt that as you navigate the new job and new routines for you and your family, you may end up feeling stretched thin. While you're busy ensuring everyone else is taken care of, it's vital to make yourself a priority too. Even if your caregiving duties are finished, you may still find the adjustment or shift in routine difficult.

As Path Forward founder Tami Forman wrote in this popular article, [self-care is not indulgent](#) – it's a discipline. Getting enough sleep, exercise and time for yourself is something you need to do regularly. You'll be best able to excel at work and take care of your home life if you first take care of yourself.

## Imposter Syndrome

Members of our alumni community often report that they experienced imposter syndrome during the returnship. Imposter syndrome is the feeling that somehow, your accomplishments are products of luck rather than talent and hard work; alternatively, you think you're not as good as you promised and that it's just a matter of time before you're exposed as a fraud.

Despite knowing that your new employer willingly chose to invest in this return to work program, you're probably putting pressure on yourself to be just like your full-time colleagues right away. It is all





too easy to fall into comparing your journey to others who have traveled a completely different road and therefore are in a different place.

The key to overcoming these feelings is contextualizing all the changes you're experiencing against the bigger picture. There's a reason that this program is for a set period of time – it takes time to onramp. As the old saying goes: Rome wasn't built in a day. In the return to work space, the only person you should be comparing your progress against is the "you" from yesterday. The most effective and fulfilling way to prove to others – and to yourself – that you are where you belong is by looking at that Success Plan and reminding yourself of the ways you are actively moving towards your goals.

## **GUILT, Gratitude and the Cultural Narrative**

Though we hope the response to your return to work has been overwhelmingly positive, it's likely that you may, at times, have second-guessed your choice or heard comments from others that made you feel guilty. Many returners in our alumni community, from parents to those who provided elder or spousal care, have mentioned feeling guilty for spending less time caregiving. From an evolutionary standpoint, guilt is what helps humans know when they've done something wrong, so that they can avoid being ostracized from the herd.

Take a second to ask yourself if you've done something wrong by returning to work. Of course the answer is "no," but it's still completely normal to feel at fault due to societal norms or the fact that your changing routines have caused some household friction. You'd be hard-pressed not to notice or even subliminally be affected by the narrative in our society about gender roles. Even a few moments of flipping through the television channels or the news can be full of these biases. This narrative can impact how you see your return to work.

Often, career-oriented women are asked how they "balance" it all, tacitly implying their attention is divided and that some familial aspect is going to suffer if her professional ambitions are realized. On the flip side, the trope of the "incompetent man" is another far-too-common and damaging narrative. The irony here is that while our society has proclaimed that work/life balance is inherently a woman's issue, all working parents – ALL working people – want and deserve balance.

If you do find yourself doubting your decision to work, consider an exercise in gratitude. Take a moment to consider who in your life has stepped up to make your return to work possible. If anyone in your personal network has cheered you on, family or friend, think of how proud they are of you. It's true: not every day is easy and it may take some time for your family to adjust. Yet, we constantly hear of heartwarming stories of others stepping up not just because they are able – but willing and happy to help. Teenaged kids can, in fact, help get dinner started a few nights a

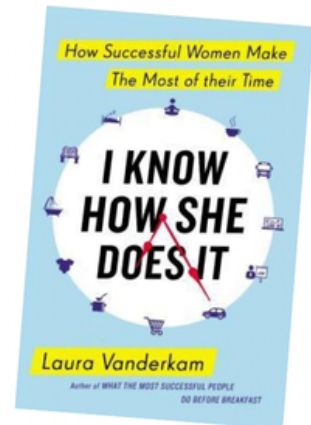




week or help their younger siblings get started on their homework. Or, partners can temporarily scale back their own commitments to ease the transition. Chances are, there are more people rooting for you than judging you; acknowledge and thank all your supporters! Above all else, remember that no one gets to decide for you what is right for you or your family.

## Integration and Time Management

At Path Forward, we're big fans of author and time management guru Laura Vanderkam, whose works include "168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think" and "I Know How She Does It." In a recent interview with Path Forward, Laura discussed managing your time as you would your checkbook: "If someone asked you to give them \$500, you'd probably raise your eyebrows and sputter. You'd at least ask some questions about it. Yet somehow asking for time doesn't raise the same trepidation even though it's the exact same thing (or worse! You can make more money. You can't make more time.) Next time someone asks you to do something you're not excited about, try putting a dollar figure on it, so the opportunity cost becomes more real (that's a trip to Florida!)."



You may consider merging your personal and professional calendars together. Doing so may help you take a more comprehensive and holistic view of how you spend your time. It may enable you to plan ahead, set boundaries, and say "no" when needed.

### **Always remember that "no" is a complete sentence.**

Saying "no" to things you don't want to do frees up time for you to say "yes" to the things you do want to do.

In the same way that saying "no" professionally can free up time for more worthy endeavors, saying no on the homefront can also prove beneficial. (If you live alone, feel free to skip to the next section.) When it comes to managing changing expectations on the homefront as you return to work, Laura advises: "First, recognize that not everything has to be done, nor does everything have to be done by you. Start demanding more from your children. Their school projects are theirs, not yours. They can make their own lunches or buy. They can help arrange carpools. You can hire after school help, and that person can take over mental responsibility for the activity schedule. Your spouse can also step up to the plate."

Now of course the goal isn't to off load every responsibility to others. Instead, it's about ensuring everyone is doing their fair share so that everything isn't falling on your shoulders. In the same way that keeping a log of your professional accomplishments (as mentioned in Module 1) can help keep your returnship on track, this tactic can also prove helpful in your personal life. In order to fully realize and acknowledge input from family members, keep a list of what tasks each person is responsible for. By noting what everyone has contributed to help the household in a given week, it's much more likely to be appreciated, and thus, positively reinforced.



## Stress Management

Simply put, having to manage caregiving, along with trying to ramp up and learn as much as you can, are a lot to handle. Sometimes, even the day-to-day nuisances can get to be too much. It's possible that you may be so into your routine, you might not even realize you are stressed – or you could be used to taking on so much that you don't realize the impact stress is actually having on you.

It is important that we keep stress in check, as it can lead to unexpected physical, emotional, behavioral, or even cognitive symptoms. When you find yourself experiencing these symptoms, it's time to implement the 4 A's of stress management:

Avoid	
<b>Plan ahead</b>	Make time each week to look ahead on your calendar and adjust for overlaps. Schedule time for breaks, including lunch and any caregiving duties.
<b>Say no</b>	Decline items/meetings that don't serve you or the business. Let go of the reins at home and let others figure out dinner/chores instead of you taking it all on.
Alter	
<b>Set limits or boundaries</b>	Allot time slots for focused work and for caregiving duties, if needed. Don't check email after hours. Block your calendar so your colleagues can see when you're available and when you're not.
<b>Change how time is managed</b>	Use tricks like the Pomodoro Technique, the 11am Technique, or the Eat the Frog Technique.
<b>Share feelings openly</b>	Let others know when you need a hand or when expectations are unclear.
Accept	
<b>Learn from mistakes</b>	Don't beat yourself up over mistakes. Learn and apply the lesson to next time.
<b>Talk to others</b>	Vent to a trusted friend, and discuss challenges/improvements with colleagues.
<b>Use positive self-talk</b>	Bring out your inner cheerleader! (More in Module 6)
Adapt	
<b>Control negative thinking</b>	Challenge negative thoughts with positive counterpoints – remind yourself of all you've accomplished and all that you are capable of.
<b>See the "big picture"</b>	Consider how any lesson you learn makes you a stronger teammate and helps you ramp up to where you want to be. It's not a race!
<b>Check your standards</b>	Don't let perfect be the enemy of the wonderful. Sometimes "good enough" is truly good enough.



## Finding Time for It All: Wisdom from Past Returners

After working with thousands of returners, we'd like to think we have a pretty good idea of what you're going through. However, no one knows better than past returners, who have truly been in your shoes. Check out what they advise to make your returnship work for you. You can read many of their stories and advice [here](#). And make sure to connect with them via [LinkedIn](#).

### Find slack in the system and lower your standards.

Yes, the household still has to run, but it doesn't have to run the same way it did when you were out of the workforce. The dishes can \*gasp\* stay in the sink overnight if needed. You can order takeout dinner a couple nights a week. It's okay.

"I think time management is essential. You have to be willing to forego a few things. I realized it's ok if my son wears a dirty shirt for a couple of hours. I don't have as much time to keep a perfect house, and that's ok."

– Lavanya, 2017 Returner

### Find time for fun.

Though you're spending the majority of your mental energy on work and helping your family adjust, don't forget that you deserve to have fun too. You're allowed to pursue hobbies, make plans with friends, and set goals that have nothing to do with work. Whether you enjoy cooking, running, dancing, writing, or competitive hula-hooping, strive to incorporate what you love into your schedule.

"I'm motivated to show my girls that if you have a passion for something, you manage your time to make it happen. Maybe you do it less, but don't take it out of your life and use the excuse 'because I'm busy.' Dancing is part of my life and balancing it with my life provides a model for my children to pursue their passions."

–Ellein, 2017 Returner

### They will adjust.

It's not uncommon for us to hear from our alumni community that while initial enthusiasm from their families was high, it can wane a bit as they get used to a different level of service at home. Don't let that deter you. Of course things are a little disrupted at home, but as our friend Laura Vanderkam says, "You are worth some disruption!" You and your family will adjust, especially when they see how happy returning to work has made you.

"I was afraid to leave my daughter at first, but now I see how well she is able to cope, self-manage, and help out with chores around the house. She sees me in a different way now, and has set certain expectations for her father now that I'm working, too. All these things boost your morale and convince you made the right choice, both to take a break, and to return to work after."

–Deepthi, 2019 Returner



**Emphasize quality over quantity.**

It's not uncommon for us to hear from past returners in our community that while initial enthusiasm from their families was high, it can wane a bit as they get used to a different level of service at home. Don't let that deter you. Of course things are a little disrupted at home, but as our friend Laura Vanderkam says, "You are worth some disruption!" You and your family will adjust, especially when they see how happy returning to work has made you.

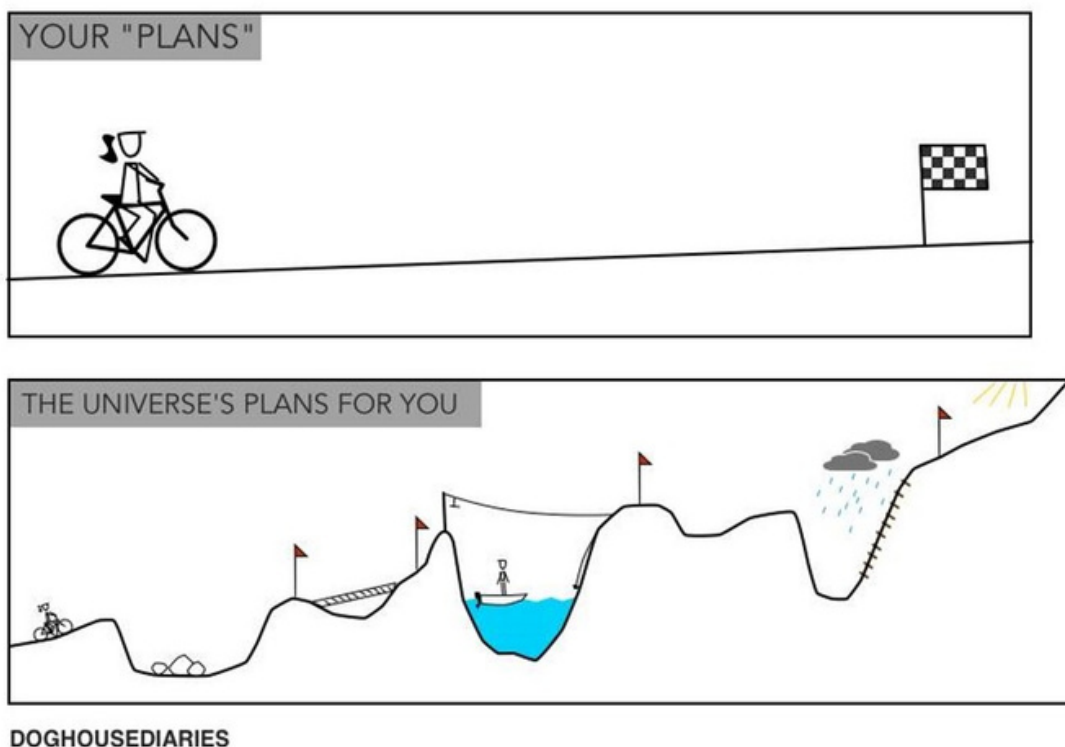
"I had a hunch that I would feel more balanced returning to work and this would in turn benefit how I showed up for myself, my family, and in the world. As a wise Path Forward alum once told me, 'It's not the quantity of time spent with kids, but the quality.'"

—Neema, 2019 Returner

**It's Not a Race**

At the end of your returnship program, you will have successfully restarted your career!

You will have new professional accomplishments, a newly expanded network and you will have learned about yourself. We hope that you feel the support from Path Forward, your company, and your returnship cohort. It's incredible to be able to go through such a unique experience together. Remember that while we are all cheering you on, it's not a race. Each of you will get where you're going on your own terms. We're excited to have a front-row seat.



DOGHOUSEDIARIES



## Resources

Discussing work/life integration strategies is a huge part of successfully returning to the workforce. While we can't get to everything in this guide, below are a few articles we think you may enjoy.

### Time Management

[The Stories We Tell Ourselves About Time](#)

[5 Steps to Creating Time For What Matters Most](#)

[Is Housework Stressing You Out? Lower Your Standards](#)

### Tips for Working Parents

[Working a Split Shift? President Obama Does It!](#)

[The "Magic Trick" of Being There, Even If You Aren't There](#)

[The Many Ways My Children Have Helped My Career](#)

[A Few Ideas For More Pleasant Mornings](#)

[Don't Let the Perfect Be the Enemy of the Wonderful](#)

[Joyful Stress](#)

[Can't Seem to "Put Yourself First"? Try This Instead](#)

[Interview with KJ Dell'Antonia: Newsflash! Parenting Can Be Fun](#)

[Book Review: How to Stop Losing Your Sh\\*t With Your Kids](#)

[Summer Strategies For Working Parents](#)

### Work/Life Integration

[Self-Care Is Not An Indulgence. It's a Discipline](#)

[Could This Really Be the Key to Work/Life Balance?](#)

[3 Myths Holding You Back at Work and at Home](#)

[Book Review: Stress Less by Kate Hanley](#)

[Podcast: Working Wife, Happy Life with Bethanie Baynes](#)

[The Myth of Achieving Work/Life Balance](#)

[Why You Should Stop Trying to Achieve Work/Life Balance](#)



Join Path Forward volunteers, alumni, and your fellow returners in our [online community](#) to find helpful advice, resources, networking, and more.