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The Essential 7

By Patti Verbanas



It was June 2007 when I made my list. I had been struggling — as we all do — with creating a balance in my life among work, family, and personal pursuits. So often we hear about a balance between work and family, but it's not regularly discussed as a trinity. We should never forget about self.

I had been suffering from panic attacks, those seizing, blinding, paralyzing moments when your life seemingly spins out of control. I was a good mom. I had a job I loved that gave me creative freedom and the flexibility. Still, balance was elusive, and I found stress had permeated my life.

What had happened? This was not "me." Not the "me" I knew. Not the "me" that would derive a smile from simple nature, inspire friends — and receive inspiration from them. Not the "me" who had the drive to learn more, understand more, be more.

That morning in June as I prepared for work, a thought, a commanding voice, spoke: Make a list. What would you need to do — and do every day — to have balance? I grabbed the nearest paper (the back of a grocery receipt) and wrote in stream-of-consciousness fashion what turned out to be my manifesto, The Essential 7 for My Life:

1. Drink more water
2. Connect with others and laugh more
3. Spend real time with my children
4. Read and write
5. Exercise
6. Be mindful of the moment
7. Eat healthier

These look basic, right? We read such things in magazines and books; we consider them, mull over them, vow to do them. But there was something about actually writing these missives on paper without any forethought that sparked an epiphany.

This was the day I started my journey, the day I started my rebirth. It's an easy list, yes — on the surface. Living it daily takes conscious effort, but an effort whose results are worthwhile.

The ways to achieve my Essential 7 are bountiful, and I've enjoyed searching for new avenues that will fulfill my daily mission. Following are just a few ways I have pursued each goal:

1. Drink More Water. I have always been a water or milk drinker and rarely consume sodas or fruit juice. Still, coffee in the morning and again in the afternoon, I realized, was robbing me of hydration. I began starting my day with a large cup of water. I cut out my afternoon coffee by warming water and drinking it instead. What I discovered was that it was the pleasure of holding a steaming cup that I enjoyed — not necessarily the caffeine jolt. I keep water in my car at all times and drink on my commute to and from work. I end my day with

another tall glass before bed. The effects were instantaneous. I felt more energized and focused and tended to eat better.

2. Connect and Laugh. We are around people all day, encountering them, but not truly connecting. Stepping that up celebrates our shared humanity and is a powerful relationship builder. Two easy initiatives: Chat with the people whom you randomly encounter during the day, like a store clerk or fellow customer — and not about the weather. Not witty? A little compliment goes a long way and will brighten not just the other person's day but yours as well. Another tactic is to call or e-mail a different friend each day. With social networks that's simple, but take it to the next level. Place a call. Mail a letter — through the Post Office. I started sending random e-greetings. My favorite site is gratefulness.org. When you connect with people in a personal way you are more apt to smile and share a laugh. Inspire others and prepare to be inspired back.

3. Spend Real Time with My Children. I carved out at least 15 minutes each day to truly be with my children (Hayden, 8, and Selina, 3). As a single mom, I find these minutes often through serendipity (a conversation waiting for a Tae Kwon Do lesson to start or while cooking dinner together) or through planning (time volunteering together or during a candle-lit dinner with linen napkins and nothing to rush to afterward).

4. Read and Write. These are my two favorite pastimes; they keep me creative, sharp, and educated. You could fill in yours here. What fires you up?

5. Exercise. I committed to visiting the gym three times a week, but as a true Sagittarius, I thrive on the outdoors and made a commitment to regularly hike, walk, or bike weekly. For me, fresh air trumps gym air every time.

6. Be Mindful of the Moment. This philosophy has become resonant to me. The more I focused on "being" rather than "doing," the richer my life has become. Mindfulness takes practice — and I'm not close to really living it fully yet — but in the three years since I started living truly in the moment, I find all facets in my life working in harmony. I laugh more, stress less, and accomplish tasks with greater ease and enjoyment. If you're interested in finding out more about Mindfulness, read Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*. Or to learn how to put a positive light in your life, check out Tal Ben-Shahar's *Happier*, which is based on his popular course at Harvard. *Happier* was the first thing I read after listing my Essential 7 and it gave my initiative the jumpstart it needed. Have little time to read but want to get your mind in the right place? Spencer Johnson's *The Precious Present* can be read over coffee. Better still: Read it to a friend.

7. Eat Healthier. This month, I kicked it up a notch by employing the services of health counselor and *NJL H+B* blogger **Lynn Nalupta**, for the next 6 months.

Follow my adventures in happier living and healthier eating here as they unfold. On "The Balance Beam," we'll experience this journey together. For now, I want to know: What are your Essential 7? Let me know at patti@newjerseylife.com. When I scribbled my list, I didn't have a firm number in mind. Perhaps you have a Necessary 9. Or a more minimalist Target 2. Don't think about it. Just write. And do it today. In the words of John Keating (of Dead Poets Society fame): "Carpe diem, seize the day, make your lives extraordinary!"



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