

# *“Me” Time*

Finding the Balance Between  
Taking Care of Others and  
Taking Care of Yourself

Jennifer Beall

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*To my daughter, April.*



*I hope you never understand  
what this book is about.*

# *Contents*

## Introduction

1. “Me” Time? What’s That?
2. Boundaries
3. Relationships
4. Needs
5. Adult Children
6. Inner Child Work
7. Life Should Be Fair
8. Coping with Illness
9. Hope and Transformation
10. Don’t Believe Everything You Think!
11. Other Helpful Approaches
12. The Serenity Prayer

## Conclusion

## Appendix

## Resources

## *Chapter 1*

# **“Me” Time? What’s That?**

1. Do you feel like you pretty much single-handedly hold your family together?
2. Are you generally in charge of making sure that things get done around the house?
3. If you have kids, are you usually the “taxi driver” who takes them to athletic practices, music lessons, etc.?
4. Do you feel like you’re busy all of the time, but still can’t get everything done?
5. Do you find yourself feeling resentful when someone else is relaxing while you’re working?

If you said “yes” to any of these questions, you probably spend a lot of time taking care of other people and very little time taking care of yourself.

You have probably taken on a lot of responsibility at home, at work, and/or elsewhere. You probably feel overworked and under-appreciated. And I’ll bet there are times you get *really* tired of it.

You may feel like Alicia, who finds herself resenting the fact that it seems she’s always taking care of everyone else but doesn’t get the same in return. It seems like every six months something happens to a member of her family. First, her daughter broke her foot playing field hockey and needed surgery. Then her husband had a heart attack and had to have triple bypass surgery. Then her brother, who worked as a roofer, fell off of a roof and was hospitalized, then in rehab, for months; when he got home he needed more help than his home healthcare worker could offer, and Alicia was usually the one who provided that help.

This reminds her of her childhood, when it seemed that her family wasn’t very concerned about her well-being, in part because it seemed like some other member of the family was always having a crisis. Her parents always said that Alicia was “fine” and didn’t need any help.

Even though there are often good reasons why others need her attention, Alicia often wonders, “When will it be my turn?”

If you’re like Alicia, though, you might also be somewhat bothered by the concept of “me” time; that sounds so selfish!

Don’t worry; I’m not suggesting that you become completely self-centered and only look out for number one. My intention (and the point of this book) is for you to find a balance between taking care of others and taking care of yourself. Neither extreme is a good idea; the goal is to find a healthy place in between the two.

## *Is Your Account Overdrawn?*

You may have heard people say that you can’t give someone else what you don’t have. That seems obvious when you’re talking about concrete objects; for instance, you can’t give someone else a piece of cake if you don’t have any cake.

But this principle also applies to intangible things like energy and time. Believe it or not, no matter how energetic you are, you can’t keep giving more and more energy to meeting other people’s needs without also replenishing that energy.

Think of it as an “energy bank.” The bank won’t let you take out more money than you have in your account, right? In fact, if you write checks for more than your checking account balance the bank charges you overdraft fees.

Some people bypass the bank account and use a credit card, sometimes to buy things they can’t afford (or for emergency expenses that they can’t cover); they may then find that their

credit card bills become unmanageably high. Similarly, you might borrow against future energy and later find yourself with a big energy debt.

Only by doing things that replenish your energy (getting enough sleep, eating well, drinking enough water, exercising, and, yes, even taking the time to do things that you enjoy) will you have the energy available to give to work, family, and friends.

If you have a dog or a cat, take some time to observe him or her. Pets are great examples of living in the moment, not worrying about the future. Cats, in particular, tend to be very good at making sure they don't meet others' needs at their own expense. And they always make sure to get plenty of sleep!

## *Finding the Middle Ground*

The name of the game here is finding balance instead of going to one extreme or the other. Unfortunately, the extremes are a lot easier to find than the middle ground. If you decide that you're only going to take care of other people and completely neglect yourself, that's pretty straightforward, although certainly not easy. If you go to the opposite extreme and worry only about yourself, that's also pretty easy to figure out, although (fortunately) it's difficult to sustain for most of us.

The challenge of the middle ground is that it involves constant decision-making. For instance, should I say yes in this case even when I want to say no, or is this a time that I should stand my ground and take care of myself? Can I find a compromise position that's good for both of us?

The balance of taking care of others and taking care of self is different for each person. Family members, friends, clergy, therapists, and others can offer feedback and suggestions, but only you can decide what the right balance is for you. If you're a perfectionist you might not enjoy the process of finding that balance, because it doesn't work perfectly at first; there's usually a lot of trial and error involved before a reasonable balance is achieved. And even then, there will be times that things will get out of balance and you'll need to make corrections.

## *What Makes You Worthwhile?*

How do you define yourself? What do you think makes you worthwhile? Most of us, if we're honest, would admit that we determine our value by what we do, not who we are. And we have very high standards for ourselves where doing is concerned.

We look for external validation; if someone doesn't show us approval we're disappointed, because we don't feel like we did a good job unless someone else (preferably someone who has authority over us) tells us that we did.

If you believe in God (and maybe even if you don't), you probably at least say you believe that your very existence makes you valuable. But do you really believe that, deep down? If you don't believe it, how about trying it on for size?

Think about the fact that there are only so many varieties of facial features, complexions, hair, etc., and yet no two people (even identical twins) look exactly alike. No two people have the same personality. Might it be possible that your uniqueness gives you an important place in the world, no matter what you have or haven't accomplished?

I don't mean to imply that the things you do are unimportant; of course they're important. But they're not necessarily the most important things about you. If you suddenly became disabled and couldn't do the things you do now, you wouldn't be any less worthy a person than you were before.

## *Women as Caretakers*

While there are exceptions to this, women on the whole tend to be caretakers. We take care of our partners, we take care of our kids, we take care of coworkers, and we often find other places that we can be caretakers, too: at church, in our children's schools, or in volunteer positions, for instance.

And if you grew up in a dysfunctional family, you learned to take even more responsibility for other people than you might otherwise have done. (More on that in chapter 2.)

Many women get a feeling of being worthwhile human beings from making themselves indispensable to others. In fact, many of us secretly (or not so secretly) believe that our families and possibly other things would completely fall apart if we weren't there to take care of them.

Let's start at home. How much do you do around the house? Do you do the laundry? Cook? Make sure the house is clean? Anything else? And how much do other family members do?

For many years most women stayed at home, and it was understood that wives took care of the cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks. Now that many women are in the workplace it can be hard to figure out how much, if at all, this should change. Should a woman who works 40 hours a week then come home and do all the cooking and cleaning?<sup>1</sup>

If you work outside of the home you may still try to single-handedly make sure the household runs smoothly. If you don't work outside of the home you may feel like you're not accomplishing as much as you could or should; if your "only" job is parenting and taking care of the house, shouldn't you expect to do it perfectly? (The answer, in case you're wondering, is no!)

## *Financial Responsibility*

Some women who don't work outside of the home think they should have less influence over the ways the family's money is spent because they are not the ones who earn it. Or they might believe they have less of a say about finances if they work outside the home but earn less than their partners do.

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<sup>1</sup> For related articles, see Anne Glusker's "Go Ahead—Just Tell Me I Have It All" at <http://anneglusker.com/HavingItAll.html> and Anne-

More and more women are taking care of their families' finances, which can lead to taking more responsibility than belongs to them when it comes to making sure their families have enough money. This can be particularly difficult if their income is inconsistent.

This is true of Margaret, who is a self-employed massage therapist. Since Margaret pays the bills, and since she is the one who does not get a regular paycheck, she feels like it is her fault when her family has financial problems. She feels "less than" when she realizes that her credit score is lower than it once was because of this; it's as if people who check her credit will disapprove of her because she doesn't have perfect credit any more.

Margaret feels fortunate, though, when she looks at what some of her friends are dealing with. For instance, Belinda is in a job she hates, but stays in it because of the benefits. She would really like to go back to school to become a teacher, but she doesn't feel like she can give up her current salary. She wishes things were more like they once were, when husbands were expected to earn enough money to support their families.

## *Responsibility for Children*

No one in our families generates more responsibilities than our kids do.

If you have kids, chances are you've taken on more than your share of responsibility for meeting their needs. With the busy schedules that kids have today, that's quite a lot of needs! The long list of parental responsibilities includes making sure they get their homework done; getting them to sports practices, dance classes, and music lessons; keeping up with their medical and dental checkups; and more. All of this takes a lot of time and energy.

We also tend to take more than our share of responsibility for our children's behaviors. Amy has a 10-year-old daughter, Riley. Riley's teacher called Amy one day to tell her that Riley had been disrupting the class by talking too much. Amy's mother-in-law frequently suggested that Amy was solely responsible for Riley's behavior and that she didn't give Riley enough time and attention because she worked outside of the home. So Amy automatically assumed that Riley's misbehavior was all her fault.

She did not take into account Riley's natural talkativeness. She didn't think about the possibility that Riley might have been bored with the lesson that was being presented, or that Riley's friends might have had something to do with it, or that her husband and other authority figures also have an influence on Riley. Instead, she decided that she, as Riley's mother, was the sole determiner of her behavior.

## *Responsibility for Partners*

It makes sense that we take a lot of responsibility for our kids; after all, parents have a great deal of influence in shaping their children. But many of us don't stop there; we also take responsibility for our husbands or partners and, by extension, our marriages.

Some women joke that their husbands are just big kids. They may treat their husbands as if they're not capable of taking care of themselves, and may do things for which their husbands could be responsible.

And, as they do with their kids, women might take more emotional responsibility for their husbands than necessary. They may take on their husbands' feelings and think it's their responsibility to fix them. And, if there are issues in their marriages, they may feel like it's their fault and, therefore, their responsibility to fix them.

## *Balancing Responsibilities*

It's no wonder that we get resentful when it feels like we're responsible for everything and not getting any help, right?

I've got a question, though. Have you asked for help? Have you let other family members know what needs to be done so that they can do their share?

You may think, "No one tells me what needs to be done. I just figure it out and do it. Why can't anyone else do that?" That's a good point, but unfortunately it probably won't get you very far.

OK, so it would be nice if your husband already knew what needed to be done to help the kids with their homework, and if he knew their schedules without asking so he could get them from one activity to another on time. It would be great if the kids automatically cleaned their rooms or helped out with other household chores. But the fact is, whether you like it or not, the best way to make sure other family members do their share is to be proactive, show and/or explain to them what needs to be done, and then get their cooperation to help do it.

## *Letting Go*

Do you have a hard time picturing yourself delegating some of the responsibilities you are currently taking on? I'm sure you can think of a lot of reasons why it wouldn't work.

It's very likely that other people will not joyfully accept new responsibilities. They will probably protest. They probably won't immediately take up those tasks.

Then there's the learning curve. They may not know how to do the tasks, or at least say they don't. It will be tempting for you to just take the jobs back: "If you want a job done right, do it yourself!"

The other person will probably not do the job exactly as you would have done it. It will be hard to watch that person doing it in a way that seems wrong to you. You will be tempted to just push the other person aside and take the job back.

Bonita found herself doing this shortly after she'd resolved to let others take on more responsibilities around the house. She asked her husband to help her put away the laundry, then immediately jumped in when he started to do it differently than she would have done it. She

didn't allow for the possibility that his way of doing it might be as good as hers. She caught herself, though, and let him do it anyway, and it turned out fine.

What happens if someone else doesn't do a task as well as you would have done it? How big a problem is that, really? What's the worst-case scenario? Can you deal with it if it happens? It's unlikely that someone will die if the task is done imperfectly!

You may find that it's hard to let go of tasks, even when you've said that you're giving them to someone else. This is part of a need to control what goes on in your life.

It will feel strange to know that someone else is doing what you're used to doing. You'll probably feel at least somewhat lost without those tasks to define you. And you'll probably feel guilty for relaxing, especially if you're doing it while someone else in the family is working.

It will be tempting to take on new responsibilities to replace the ones you've let go. Can you resist that temptation and instead use your newfound time and freedom to take care of yourself?

You may be at a loss at first to figure out what to do with that time. You may no longer remember what you enjoy doing in your time off because it's been so long since you've had some. Here are some ideas to prompt your thinking:

- take a walk
- spend time in nature
- do yoga
- go running
- go to the gym
- watch a movie
- read a book
- take a nap
- call a friend
- go out with a friend
- work on a craft project
- play an instrument
- sing along with the radio
- draw or paint
- sculpt (such as with Sculpey® polymer clay)
- scrapbook
- take a bubble bath
- get a massage
- get a manicure/pedicure
- play with your dog

- pet your cat
  - do a puzzle
  - Knit, crochet, or do other needlework
- etc.

Whatever you choose, make sure it's something you really enjoy and that rejuvenates you. Don't choose something because you think you "should" choose it. "Should" is one of those words that is rarely helpful and is often harmful.

And be gentle with yourself through this process. You may feel lost or adrift if you feel like you have to find a new way to define yourself. That makes sense. But give it time.

Many of us want instant gratification; we want things to work right away. But this is the sort of thing that will not happen immediately. Don't give up if it doesn't work the way you envisioned it, because it's uncomfortable, or because it isn't happening fast enough. It took a long time for the current patterns to be established, and it will take a while for new ones to take hold.

When you find yourself thinking that without you your family and/or workplace would not be able to go on, remind yourself that if you suddenly hopped a plane to another country and never came back they would manage to survive; they would figure out how to do what needed to be done. So why not give them the benefit of the doubt now and let them pitch in even though you haven't left?

Before you start trying new behaviors, though, let me say that I know we don't live in a perfect world. It's not possible to have things perfectly balanced and perfectly fair to everyone. There won't be a brief adjustment period after which everyone in the family cheerfully does all of their assigned tasks with everyone doing a fair share of the work all the time. There may be some tasks that continue to go undone; at that point you may need to decide if it's time to take those tasks back and do them yourself.

Again, I'm suggesting that you work towards a reasonable balance. The other part of the task, then, is making peace with the inequities that still exist, which is addressed later in the book, particularly in Chapter 12.

In the next couple of chapters we'll talk more about the reasons why it's not only better for you, but also for the people in your life, if you let them take on more responsibilities.

## Putting It Into Action

**What is a typical week like for your family? What activities go on, and who is responsible for what?**

*Rita: I have a husband (Fred), three kids (Bronwyn, age 17, Sam, age 14, and Jenna, age 6), a dog (Buster), and a cat (Allie).*

*I work 20 hours a week for the local newspaper as an editor and proofreader. Fred works at least 60 hours a week running an insurance agency.*

*I have arranged my work schedule so I can pick the kids up from school and shuttle them to their many after-school activities. Bronwyn has private violin lessons once a week and ballet two nights a week. She also has a part time job on the weekends. Sam is involved in sports year-round, including soccer, basketball, and lacrosse; he typically has practices two or three nights a week and games on Saturdays and/or Sundays. Jenna has ballet one day a week.*

*I arrange doctors' and dentist's appointments for the kids and vet visits for Buster and Allie; I also take them to the appointments.*

*When the kids and I get home on weekdays, I cook dinner and help them with homework. After dinner the kids finish their homework (and, in Bronwyn's case, violin practicing) under my supervision, have some free time, then go to bed.*

*Fred never knows what time he'll get home from work. On rare days he may be home by 6:00 or 7:00; on some of those days he is able to have dinner with the family. Other days he doesn't come home until 9:00 or 10:00, so Jenna is often in bed when he gets home.*

*On weekends I take Sam to his games. Sometimes Fred is at home with Bronwyn and Jenna during this time, but he often works on the weekends, so I take Jenna with me on those days. All three kids have activities with friends throughout the weekend; I usually provide transportation for those, too. When Fred is home he mows the lawn and does yard work. He also takes care of the family finances.*

*On Saturdays, in between driving my kids around, I clean the house. Most Sundays I take the kids to church in the morning and then do laundry in the afternoon and evening. Fred occasionally goes to church with us. When he doesn't go to church he works around the house in the morning. In the afternoon he watches sports on TV because he's exhausted from all of the work he did during the week and wants time to relax.*

*Sunday nights are family nights, with family members taking turns choosing the activities. The kids always complain about family night and say they'd rather have the evening to themselves. I usually end up suggesting an activity and feeling like I need to make sure everyone is having a good time.*

*Bronwyn and I are the ones who walk Buster most of the time, although Sam was the one who had begged to get a dog. I clean Allie's litter box; for a time, I tried to rotate that duty, but no one else ever did it, so I took it over.*

**How do you feel about the current arrangement? Do you think your family's responsibilities are distributed fairly? Are you content to keep things as they are, or would you like things to change?**

*I am exhausted most of the time, and I resent the fact that my husband is rarely home, leaving most of the family responsibilities to me. I feel like I am reaching a breaking point. I am getting more and more irritable, and I feel like my husband and kids are avoiding me because of it. I've also been getting comments from coworkers about my temper being worse than usual.*

*I have been offered a promotion that would mean I would work full time instead of part time. I love my work and would like to feel like a "real" employee. I know that the kids will leave home eventually, and I want to have my career established before then. But I don't know how I can do it, particularly if nothing changes at home. If I'm exhausted now, what would happen if I worked more?*

*I have always prided myself on how smoothly I run the household with little or no help. Now I realize that a major change is needed; other family members will have to step up and start doing more or I will become more and more resentful and the whole family will suffer.*

*I have talked to Fred before about making changes, but I have never pushed the issue because I am used to the way things are and feel good about all of the things I am successfully juggling. Because of my ambivalence, Fred hasn't felt obligated to do anything about it. I now know it's time for the family to make major changes, though, and I am determined to make it happen.*

*I have never really assigned many chores to the kids and haven't been consistent about making sure that they do the jobs I have given them. Now I'm looking at things a bit differently. I realize that it can actually be helpful for the kids to learn to be responsible for some things, and so I decide to work with Fred to assign age-appropriate chores to them and make sure that they do them.*

**How might you go about making the needed changes?**

*I make a list of the main family responsibilities, including cleaning, homework (and homework supervision), laundry, mowing the lawn, transportation, etc. Next to each task, I write down who usually performs that task now, how often it is done, and the average amount of time it takes. I also list family members who are capable of doing each job.*

*The following Sunday I call a family meeting to look at redistribution of responsibilities.*

*Fred and the kids are skeptical, as expected. They're happy about the current arrangement. They do acknowledge that they would like me to be happier, though.*

*So, with some negotiations, the family agrees upon a plan. Fred agrees to delegate more work responsibility to the most experienced of his employees, which will free him up to get*

home earlier a couple of evenings a week and not work during the weekend. Then he will be able to help the kids with their homework and not have as many evenings when he doesn't see Jenna at all. He's also agreed to take the kids and pets to some of their appointments.

Fred agrees to take Sam to his games on the weekends, which helps him to be more involved in Sam's life. Because of his reduced work hours he will also be able to spend more time with his daughters, which they appreciate.

I have decided to accept the promotion. My boss has agreed to let me work 7:00-3:00. Bronwyn and Sam have to be at school early anyway, and Jenna likes getting up early and can go to a friend's house before school. With those work hours, I am available to get the kids from school and get them to their after-school activities.

Fred and I decide to pay half the cost of a used car for Bronwyn, with her paying the other half from money she has earned at her job. That way she can drive herself to her activities and free up some of my time. Bronwyn also agrees to watch her younger brother and sister once or twice a week so I can have more time to myself.

Fred and I ask each of the kids to be responsible for making their own beds, keeping their rooms clean, and cleaning up after themselves. All three of them are to help with doing their own laundry, including Jenna, who is to help fold clothes and put them away.

While I will still be the main person doing the cooking, Fred and Bronwyn will each make one dinner a week. No one in the family enjoys doing dishes, so we decide to rotate that job. Jenna isn't old enough to do the dishes by herself, but she can help load the dishwasher. The person who cooks the meal does not have to do the dishes afterwards.

There are other jobs that no one enjoys, like cleaning the bathroom or dusting, so we agree to rotate those, too.

Sam likes to vacuum, so that job is assigned to him. He is also assigned to do one dog walk a day. Jenna wants to help with pet care, too, so she agrees to help clean Allie's litter box.

Fred and I come up with age-appropriate rewards for the kids when they help around the house, and clearly spell out the consequences of not doing assigned tasks.

I agree that the family nights are not working, so we decide that family time will be more flexible and spontaneous, not like an assigned chore.

I sign up for a yoga class as part of getting back into an exercise routine. I also decide to return to some of the activities I enjoy, like reading and scrapbooking.

### **What are the biggest difficulties you have with making the changes?**

Even though Fred and the kids agree to the changes, the transition doesn't go smoothly. Fred frequently allows himself to be caught up in his work, which means that he often doesn't get home when promised. He's not used to the family schedules, so I often end up reminding him about homework supervision, appointments, and practices. The kids aren't used to being responsible for chores, and they don't do them consistently at first.

*Fred and the kids also don't do the chores to my satisfaction, and I find myself taking over tasks so they will be done to my standards.*

*I have problems taking time for myself. I'm not used to doing it, and my identity is very much wrapped up in being busy doing things for other people. It feels wrong to take care of myself, and I feel particularly guilty when I'm doing something for myself while someone else is working.*

*I decide to stick to it, though, and get used to not being quite so indispensable. When I find myself starting to take on the indispensable role at work, I remind myself to back off; I don't need to exchange one problem for another. I do get some resistance from coworkers, who are used to me working too hard and taking on their responsibilities as well as mine.*

*I work on relaxing my standards for how things should be done, and I try to be flexible when other family members do things in their own time rather than when I want them to be done.*

*The new plan is certainly not working perfectly, but it is better than before. I just hope that we'll be able to maintain this and maybe even improve it.*

***If you have enjoyed this book chapter, visit <http://tinyurl.com/aglydqk> to purchase "Me" Time: Finding the Balance Between Taking Care of Others and Taking Care of Yourself in paperback or Kindle format.***