

QUESTION

How could I balance continuing to work while pursuing a degree?

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In October 2010, the Institute of Medicine released the report *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, which called for 80% of all nurses to have a BSN degree by 2020. This expectation was overwhelming and, in the beginning, I felt like it was an insult. I have had my associate degree in nursing for more than 20 years. All I could ask was: How can I have worked so many years and now be considered a subpar nurse? Regardless, the fact remained that I needed to return to college and obtain a higher degree.

Pursuing my BSN would require a tremendous amount of time and energy. My greatest challenge was time. Working a full-time job did not lend itself to going to school with a full course load. On the other hand, taking only one or two classes at a time was going to be painful and take forever. How was I going to finish school and stay on task at work? Would I be able to balance the two and, if so, at what cost?

Throughout my journey, I found many supportive people and strategies that allowed me to finish my degree and keep my sanity. First and foremost was my family. Their understanding and support were key to my success in attaining my degree. Second, my director was supportive and encouraging. She gave me the ability to take time off, if needed, so I could keep up with the hectic pace of school. Third, my employer provided tuition reimbursement. Although it didn't cover the full cost of my tuition, I was fortunate to have this financial assistance. Many other work environments do not provide this benefit to their staff. And finally, I had the support of amazing coworkers in my department. Many of us were in the same situation and back in school at the same time. Our office became a team resource center as we

collaborated and shared books and classroom experiences. That support made the journey so much easier. I even had a "study buddy" who took almost every class with me. We studied together and supported each other when things were rough.

Along the way, I learned the importance of time management, such as scheduling dedicated time to complete class assignments. For me, the best time of day to study was early in the morning before I went to work. I also set weekly goals to ensure that my work was done before or on time. As a result, I could still spend time with my family and avoid feeling like I was missing out on being involved in their lives.

Frankly, although I loved my job and wanted my degree, I wasn't sure I would be able to balance work and school. How would I find enough time to study outside of work? Interestingly though, the closer I was to achieving my goal, the more efficient and motivated I became.

Even my patients helped in maintaining my motivation. They were amazed to learn that I was in school and then would often ask about my progress. Their words of encouragement were so special to me.

So how did I get through school? Well, to quote the Beatles, "I get by with a little help from my friends." Support from friends, family, and coworkers all played an important role in my success in obtaining my BSN. Because of their support and my hard work, I was able to reach a goal I had never dreamed of.

Now that I have my BSN, I am proud of my achievement—so proud that, when my director asked me to go for my master's degree, I said yes!

RESOURCES

■ **American Association of Colleges of Nursing**

Information on BSN programs
<http://bit.ly/2hodWkD>

■ **ONS Foundation**

Information about scholarship opportunities for BSN programs
<http://onsfoundation.org/apply/ed/bachelors>

■ **U.S. News & World Report**

An extensive ranking of private and public universities and liberal arts colleges
<http://bit.ly/2cKjGDz>

REFERENCE

Institute of Medicine. (2010). *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

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