

Talking Polarities: From Just Either/Or to Supplementing Either/Or w/Both/And

**Margaret Cary, MD MBA MPH PCC
and Cliff Kayser, MSOD, MSHR, PCC**

“I’m so exhausted. I love my patients, but caring for them gets in the way of time with my family. I have young kids and I want to be there for them. My dad was always at work and I barely remember him. I don’t want that to happen to my kids.”

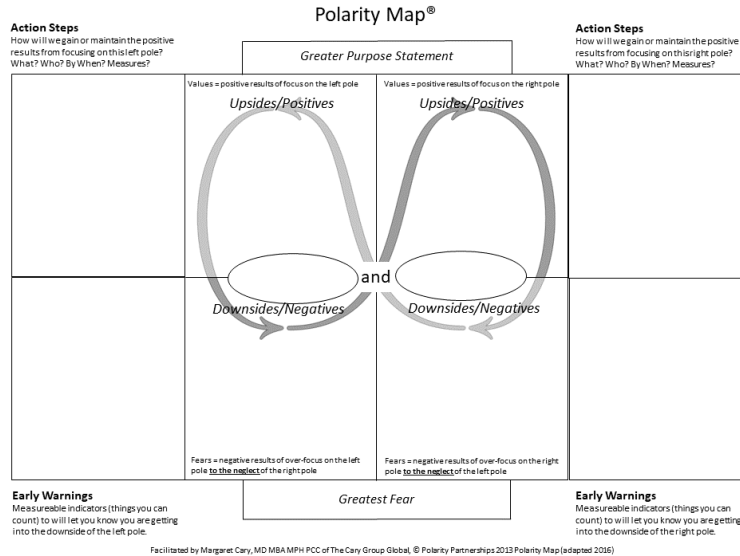
Does this sound familiar?

Which comes first, your professional life or your personal life?

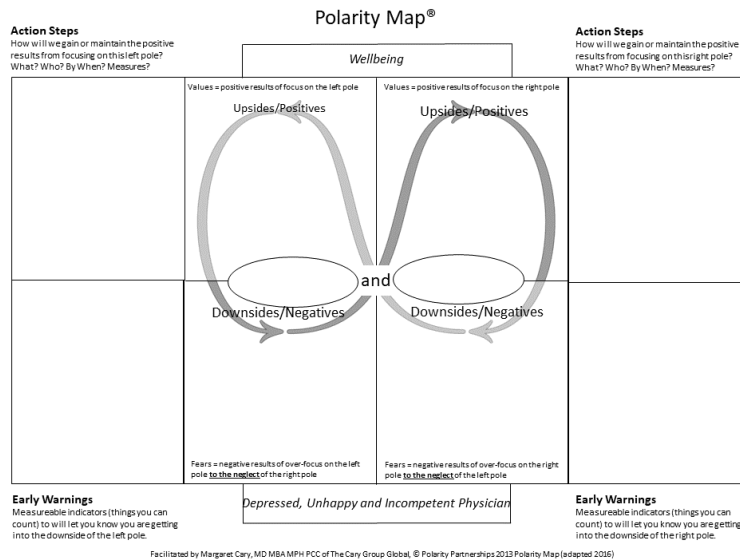
Answer: They both do – but at different times. When the tension between professional and personal is poorly leveraged over time, both will suffer as a result. If we step back far enough, what we’re likely to see is that the dynamic tension between the two fell into the “Either/Or” category of a problem to solve. A simple reframe that could make big difference in success, is the thinking that’s being applied – rather than EITHER one OR the other, think, “How might I leverage this tension to get the benefits of BOTH Professional AND Personal Lives, to support wellbeing? This reframe is important – whatever your profession.

Work with us here as we walk you through creating your own Polarity Map®, using Professional and Personal Lives as an example.

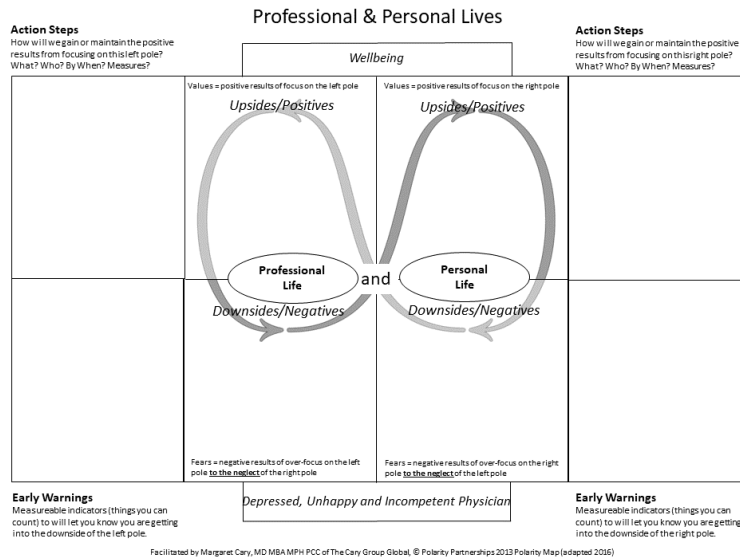
Here’s a blank map.



What is your Greater Purpose Statement, or GPS? Let's use "WELLBEING – As an excellent clinician, who is satisfied with how I've integrated other important parts of my life." What is your greatest fear? Let's use "Being depressed, unhappy and an incompetent physician."

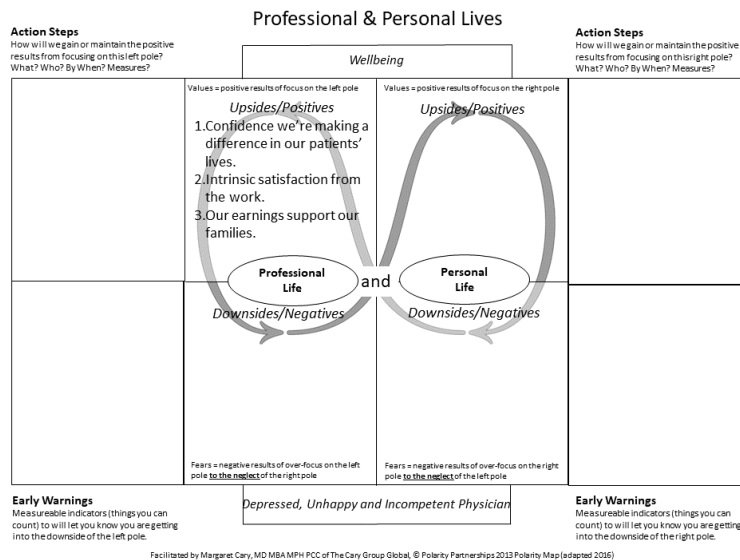


Next, write your preferred polarity in the racetrack blank on the left, labeled "A." Because this is an issue about coaching physicians, who (for better or worse) put their Professional Life first, let's put "Professional (Life)" on the left and "Personal (Life)" on the right.



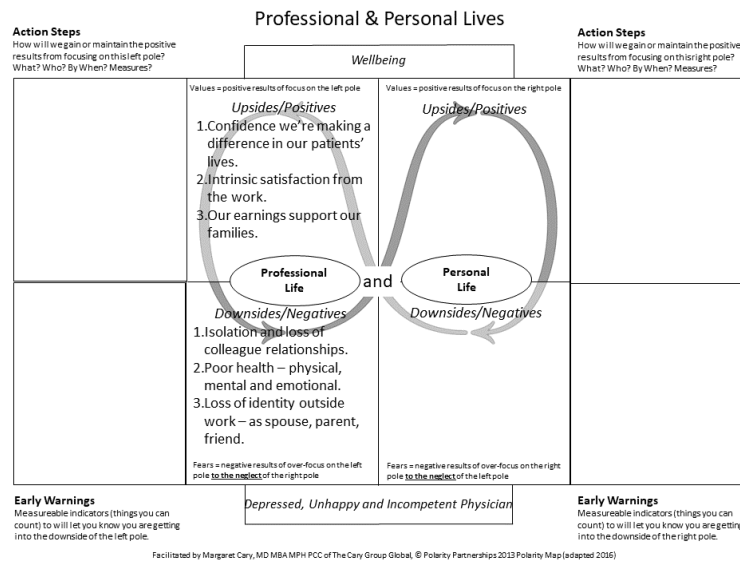
Next, look at the upper left quadrant, or LUQ for those of us familiar with examining abdomens, labeled “B.” Write down all the positives, or “upsides,” as they’re called in Polarity Thinking, to focusing on our professional lives. We’ll choose three for this example:

1. Security and confidence we’re making a difference in our patients’ lives
2. Intrinsic satisfaction from the work
3. Our earnings support our families



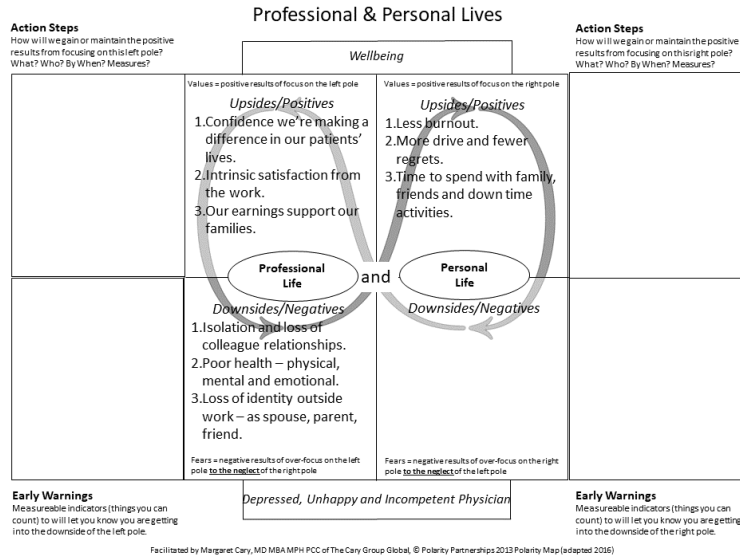
Follow the arrow to the left lower quadrant, or LLQ. What happens when we focus too much on our professional lives to the neglect of our personal lives, the negatives, or “downsides”?

1. Isolation and loss of personal relationships
2. Poor health, physical, mental and emotional
3. Loss of identity outside work – as spouse, parent, friend



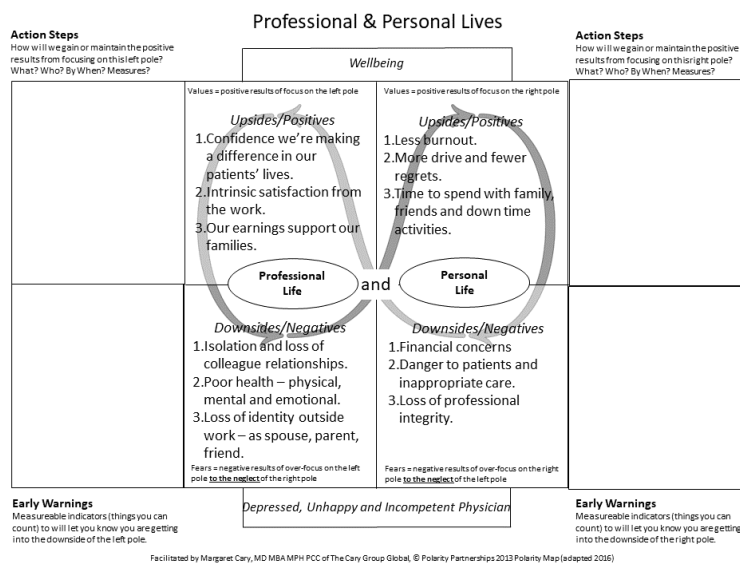
Follow the arrow again, this time crossing at the midpoint to the right upper quadrant, to the upsides, or positives, of focusing on our personal lives. We're starting to feel better as we consider three results of focusing on our personal lives.

1. Less burn-out
2. More drive and fewer regrets
3. Time to spend with family and friends.



We're feeling satisfied, and then we get a nagging feeling we're not doing enough for our patients as we drop into the right lower quadrant to the downsides, or negative results of over-focusing on our personal lives. Here are three examples from other polarity maps we've seen.

1. Financial concerns
2. Danger to patients and inefficiency of care
3. Lose professional integrity.



“Great. Now what?” I can hear you say.

Let's go back to the upsides of your professional lives. Here are a few of others' ideas for maintaining the positive results from focusing on their professional lives, called Action Steps.

What is this? Who does it?

1. I will develop more professional relationships – e.g., coffee with three colleagues each week
2. I will establish a structure and timelines
3. Establish boundaries for your time

Here are a few ideas for maintaining the positive results from focusing on your personal lives.

1. Make a list of what's important – to guide you
2. Take your own advice
3. Define priorities/values/boundaries

Note #3 for both are similar. This is called a High Leverage Action Step – by setting boundaries you are helping to maintain your position in the upsides of both professional and personal lives.

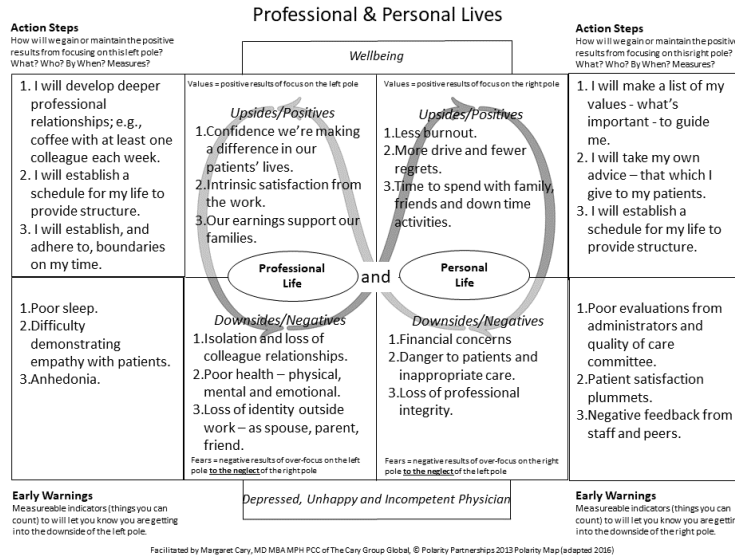
Now to the Early Warnings, which are measurable indicators to let you know you are dipping into the downside of the indicated pole, to the neglect of the other pole.

Professional Lives Early Warnings

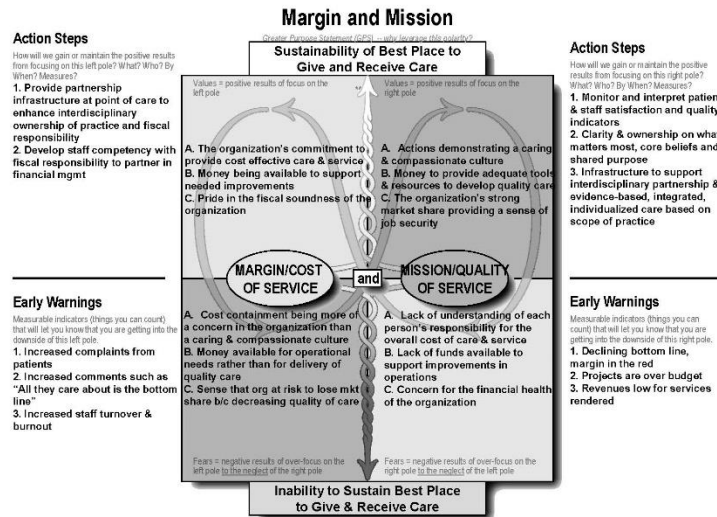
1. Poor sleep
2. Difficulty demonstrating empathy with patients
3. Anhedonia

Personal Lives Early Warnings

1. Poor care evaluations from patients, administrators and quality of care committees
2. Negative feedback from staff and peers
3. Patient satisfaction plummets



Let's look at a Polarity Map for Mission and Margin.



"Patient care, patient care. You doctors are all alike – you're always focused on yourselves and caring for patients. Yeah, right. We need money to run the operation."

"You suits are all alike – all you think about is money. You don't understand patient care. We want a caring a compassionate culture."

“You don’t understand your responsibility for our overall costs. I’m concerned that we won’t have enough money for the improvements we need.”

“I cannot get my patients into hospital. Our patients are starting to ask about going to another hospital.”

Does this sound familiar?

When we’re arguing we tend to start with the upsides of our preferred pole, and the person at the other pole argues for the upsides of his pole. Here’s a learning point: We’re more afraid of the downsides of the non-preferred pole than we are enthusiastic about the upsides of the preferred pole. Humans are naturally risk averse. Research shows that we’re more apt to hold onto something we have, sometimes to our detriment, than we are to take a risk.

So . . . how can this help you when you’re working through a polarity pair, such as Mission and Margin?

Map the polarity pole you prefer, say Mission. And then put yourself in the role of the person who prefers the other polarity pole, in this case, Margin. What are the downsides of your preferred pole – the negatives from focusing too much on Mission to the neglect of Margin? Address these fears when negotiating with those who prefer the other pole. Even better: Ask the person who prefers the other pole to work with you.

Look at the downsides of focusing on the pole you don’t prefer – and ask your counterpart to address those.

Our clients, and especially our physician clients, find this a valuable exercise to complete, to understand other points of view, in negotiation and patient care.