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## **Dual-Career Marriages: What Makes them Work?**

Tampa, Fla. (July 16, 2003) — Two-career couples face more complicated issues than those with only one spouse employed outside the home. But with practical scheduling, creative thinking, flexibility and good communication, a marriage with two wage earners can be successful and rewarding.

“Dual-career couples must wrestle with the dilemmas of how to support each other’s career development, while juggling childcare, housekeeping, and their personal relationship,” says Kathy J. Marshack, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist based in Vancouver, Washington. “On the positive side, many dual-career couples report that two careers enhance their personal relationship. Both husbands and wives report that it is very rewarding to be married to someone who is interesting, intelligent and powerful. Yet the time commitment to career and family is heavy, and often the marriage relationship is the last attended to, after work, children and housekeeping.”

“There can be a great temptation to become more intimate with your profession than you are with your partner,” observes Peter A. D. Sherrard, Ph.D. at the University of Florida’s marriage and family therapy program. “That’s why it’s important to remember you have *two* partners, your spouse and your career.”

“Your relationship *is* a job,” Chris Fariello tells his patients. He’s a licensed marriage and family therapist at the Council for Relationships in Philadelphia. “It’s important to keep this in mind all the time. You have to work on it every day, and your performance is being evaluated. If you don’t perform to your partner’s expectations, you’ll hear about it. And if you don’t put the effort in on a regular basis, you run the risk of getting ‘fired.’”

Fariello uses his own marriage as an example. He typically works 10 to 12 hours a day, and his wife works full-time in a hospital and attends school part-time. “We’ve become very good at scheduling,” he says.

**“Whenever my wife gets her work schedule, the first thing we do is overlay it with mine, and then with our daughter’s,” Fariello explains. “This helps us see when we will need child care or other outside help, and—this is the next critical thing—when we can plan time together. We make it a point to find time for ‘date night’ at least twice a month. Then we set aside every Friday as ‘family night.’ It’s the one time every week we can be sure to have some ‘down time’ as a family. Typically we go out to eat, see a movie, or just open up the sofa bed, make popcorn and watch a movie at home. Whatever we end up doing, putting that night into the schedule assures us of some uninterrupted time together as family to laugh, play, talk and relax. It’s become such a regular thing that our friends know not to ask us to do anything on a Friday night.”**

**“The other thing I recommend to my patients, and try to follow myself, is to recognize the importance of time for self,” says Fariello. “That can be anything from reading, doing yoga, gardening, anything that we enjoy doing alone. It’s important for people to do this, and allow time for their spouse to be alone, too. Otherwise, resentment can build, and it comes out through such complaints as ‘I do everything around here,’ ‘I’m not appreciated,’ ‘I need help,’ or it boils over into some sort of conflict.”**

**“Flexibility is very important when both people work,” Fariello emphasizes. “There are so many external factors that can’t be controlled, so we like to recommend that couples come up with some creative ‘what-if’ scenarios. This builds in some flexibility so that things like a sick child won’t throw the whole family into crisis. Every schedule at some time is going to need to shift to ‘Plan B.’ In preparing for the inevitable sick child, for example, couples should talk about who could stay home, and if neither can, then what the backup plan should be—should we call our parents, or can we afford a babysitter—things like that.”**

**“With that in mind,” Fariello continues, “one thing that hasn’t changed dramatically is that couples still look to their relatives as resources to help with child care and other issues to help them cope. The most successful couples realize they can’t always do everything on their own. And when their families aren’t nearby, they’re creating their own family-like networks of friends, co-workers and neighbors to lean on for support.”**

**In any relationship, good communication is key. And for two-career couples it’s especially important to make time for discussions about important family issues and about the relationship itself, says Fariello. “Sharing vulnerabilities is a part of that dialogue, because the best partnerships are also friendships.”**

**“Couples who love each other must tackle problems that inevitably come up from time to time,” says Paul Coleman, Psy.D., in his book *How to Say It For Couples*. (Prentice Hall Press, 2002) “While some problems may be within the relationship, many stressors originate outside the relationship: an unexpected illness, a financial setback, a child in trouble at school, neighborhood problems, difficulties with a boss,**

and so on. The good news is that those problems are often temporary and solvable.” When dealing with those types of stresses, Coleman writes, “the ability to soothe and support one another emotionally is more important in reducing emotional distress than the specific details of how to tackle the problem. First soothe, then solve,” he emphasizes.

Communication is essential, echoes Sherrard. “Remind your partner how important they are to you, how much you care, and take advantage of even the smallest moments to do that,” he advises. “When couples are exhausted at the end of a day, this requires extra effort, but giving each other tenderness and understanding helps.”

A good set of tools for “taking the temperature” of your relationship and then communicating about it can be found in the book “Why Marriages Succeed or Fail...And How You Can Make Yours Last,” by John Gottman, Ph.D. The book offers self-tests for couples and identifies areas where improvements may be needed.

“There are rewards and challenges in the dual-career lifestyle,” says Marshack. “In order to make your marriage the best it can be you must be willing to take the time to talk, to get away for an evening, or take a weekend holiday. After all, your marriage is the center of your family. A strong loving friendship between husband and wife builds a strong healthy family. And if professional help is needed, don’t hesitate to see a marriage and family therapist. Often a professional can help you reorganize some priorities and teach you tools of communication that will cut through the conflicts.”

### **Keeping Your Marriage Strong: Gottman's Tips**

Since 1973, Dr. John Gottman has studied what he calls the "masters and disasters" of marriage. Ordinary people from the general public took part in long-term studies, and Dr. Gottman learned what makes marriages fail, what makes them succeed, and what can make marriages a source of great meaning. By examining partners' heart rates, facial expressions, and how they talk about their relationship to each other and to other people, Dr. Gottman is able to predict with more than 90% accuracy which couples will make it, and which will not.

**Seek help early.** The average couple waits six years before seeking help for marital problems (and keep in mind, half of all marriages that end do so in the first seven years). This means the average couple lives with unhappiness for far too long.

**Edit yourself.** Couples who avoid saying every angry thought when discussing touchy topics are consistently the happiest.

**Soften your "start up."** Arguments first "start up" because a spouse sometimes escalates the conflict from the get-go by making a critical or contemptuous remark in a confrontational tone.

**Accept influence.** A marriage succeeds to the extent that the husband can accept influence from his wife. If a woman says, "Do you have to work Thursday night? My mother is coming that weekend, and I need your help getting ready," and her husband replies, "My plans are set, and I'm not changing them," this guy is in a shaky marriage. A husband's ability to be persuaded by his wife (rather than vice-versa) is so crucial because, research shows, women are already well practiced at accepting influence from men, and a true partnership only occurs when a husband is able to do so as well.

**Have high standards.** Happy couples have high standards for each other even as newlyweds. The most successful couples are those who, even as newlyweds, refused to accept hurtful behavior from one another. The lower the level of tolerance for bad behavior in the beginning of a relationship, the happier the couple is down the road.

**Learn to repair and exit the argument.** Successful couples know how to exit an argument. Happy couples know how to repair the situation before an argument gets completely out of control. Successful repair attempts include: changing the topic to something completely unrelated; using humor; stroking your partner with a caring remark ("I understand that this is hard for you"); making it clear you're on common ground ("This is our problem"); backing down (in marriage, as in the martial art Aikido, you have to yield to win); and, in general, offering signs of appreciation for your partner and his or her feelings along the way ("I really appreciate and want to thank you for...."). If an argument gets too heated, take a 20-minute break, and agree to approach the topic again when you are both calm.

**Focus on the bright side.** In a happy marriage, couples make at least five times as many positive statements to and about each other and their relationship ("We laugh a lot") as opposed to negative ones ("We never have fun"). A good marriage must have a rich climate of positivity.

*Dr. John Gottman and his wife Julie are founders of the Seattle-based Gottman Institute, which uses leading-edge research on marriage to help couples and train therapists to help couples.*

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## **About Wood & Associates**

**Wood & Associates is an employee assistance and behavioral health consulting firm that helps employers maintain productivity, safety and behavioral health in the workplace. Wood & Associates is a pioneer in the Employee Assistance Program**

**(EAP) industry and has served employers and employees in the greater Tampa Bay area and elsewhere since 1982. The firm's diverse group of clients includes a number of major employers who also contract for its mental health and substance abuse services.**

**Gary L. Wood, Psy.D., founder of the Wood & Associates consulting practice, is a pioneer in the field of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. Since 1979, his practice has centered on providing solutions to employee and organizational problems. Wood is a licensed clinical psychologist, a member of The National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, and a graduate of Rutgers University, West Georgia College and Mercer University.**

**Patricia N. Alexander earned a Ph.D. in mental health counseling at the University of Florida. Trained in critical incident stress management through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, she is a Florida licensed mental health counselor and nationally certified counselor. Dr. Alexander is an educator and consultant who presents on a wide variety of behavioral health issues. Through her work experience she has addressed all types of critical incident situations, including explosions, multiple homicides, suicides, line-of-duty deaths, serious accidents and robberies. Alexander conducts training on stress management for law enforcement and businesses, and has developed peer support programs for law enforcement and industry.**