

# When Stress at Work Creates Drama at Home

The spillover effect can jeopardize relationships—here's what you can do if hard times on the job change how you behave during off-hours

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Work is seeping into weekends and other personal time, and women are logging more hours on the job.

Those trends are turning many couples' after-work hours into a minefield.

People who put in long days on stressful jobs tend to carry the strain over into their lives at home. They start arguments or withdraw emotionally and neglect their partners after work—a pattern researchers call the spillover effect.

“You're quicker to raise your voice at a child or spouse. You're more easily antagonized,” says Dawn Carlson, a management professor at Baylor University.

This can trigger a downward cycle of stress if spouses carry the effects back to work the next day, hurting their ability to concentrate and be productive, according to a 2018 study of 389 couples led by Dr. Carlson.

Spillover is especially hazardous to relationships if the employee is both passionate about a job and obsessed with succeeding at it, another recent study shows.

Wendy Wisner of New York says her husband became so drained, depressed and angry while teaching at a financially strapped public school that she worried about whether their marriage would survive. Teaching and working with students had been his lifelong passion, but he faced so many classroom disciplinary problems, with so little support from administrators, that he became irritable at home and began having panic attacks. His tension made it hard to communicate at home. Nearly all of the couple's family and household duties fell to her.

Ms. Wisner, a writer for a parenting site, Scary Mommy, was relieved when, after several years, he finally resigned and took a much less stressful job. “His mood and temperament became normal almost overnight,” she says.

Having one partner find a new job to take the pressure off isn't always an option. Recent research sheds light on how couples can take control of their after-work time in other ways.

**Adapt to inborn differences.** Some people have a fight-or-flight response to stress. When challenged, they may resort to flight, and pull into a shell to calm themselves and avoid starting a fight. Others have a tend-and-befriend response to stress, an impulse to seek comfort by approaching others to talk, says Adela Timmons, an assistant professor of clinical and quantitative psychology at Florida International University.

The tend-and-befriend response is more common among women, and it tends to spark more arguments, according to a 2016 study Dr. Timmons led. But men's stereotypical fight-or-flight response can be just as damaging if spouses read their withdrawal as emotional neglect.

Understanding these physiological differences can help prevent after-work spillover.

Maddy Rae Cooper sometimes needs to vent her frustration after a tough day. "Then I'm not holding it deep inside, allowing it to ferment and then explode," says Ms. Cooper, a Los Angeles marketing manager, photographer and actor. She used to try to get her partner, Matt Orlando, to do the same, and was bewildered when her attempts to get him talking just stressed him out more.

In time, they realized their responses to stress were nearly opposite. Rather than venting, Mr. Orlando, a jazz musician and coffee shop barista, says he prefers to take time alone to relax and work on his music.

The insight enabled them to work out a new pattern: When Ms. Cooper needs to vent, she asks him. Mr. Orlando says he listens carefully, offering help if needed. And she gives him space to decompress. "Navigating work stress has been a defining point in our relationship," Ms. Cooper says. "It has made us a stronger couple."

**Change your routine.** Nathan Davis's job as an engineer on large infrastructure-construction projects is extremely stressful. He and his wife, Rachel Goodlad, used to bicker after work about small issues, such as forgetting an errand. "We had all this friction in the family, and it was hard to identify what the problem was," says Mr. Davis, of The Woodlands, Texas.

In talking it over, they realized they had different needs. Ms. Goodlad's work as a business owner and career coach for entrepreneurs entails a lot of work online, leaving her eager to socialize after work. Mr. Davis, who works with people all day, needs alone time.

"This can't be our life forever, where I want to go out and do things all the time and you don't," Ms. Goodlad recalls saying to him.

They adapted by changing their routine. After Ms. Goodlad picks up their children Fitz, 3, and Quinn, 1, from child care, Mr. Davis assumes bath-and-bedtime duty, freeing her to join and take part in community-service groups in the evening.

They also work hard on communication, texting during the day to gauge each other's needs. If Mr. Davis is having a tough day, Ms. Goodlad gives him free time by taking Fitz and Quinn to visit her mother after child care, or out to dinner.

“We have learned to be very direct with each other and ask questions like, ‘What do you need right now?’” Ms. Goodlad says. “Often, giving space or quiet time to each other is all that’s needed.”

**Create mental space.** Many people shed job stress by doing something completely different right after work, such as going to happy hour or the gym. Healthy couples also find ways to hit the reset button together.

Annika Welander, managing director of a Chicago creative-design agency, and her partner, Lily Wolfrum, hit reset by creating what they call a third space: a period after work when they’re not working, but when they also might not talk much.

Each is free to pursue activities to unwind. Ms. Welander might cook dinner while listening to a podcast. Ms. Wolfrum, who works in corporate sales, might do yin yoga, holding an uncomfortable dragon pose. “Whether we’re cooking, going on a run or sitting reading a trashy sci-fi novel, it’s incredibly healing,” Ms. Welander says. That leaves both relaxed for time together later in the evening, to talk, read together or watch TV.

To Protect Your Home Life

## **DO**

- \* Build a buffer between work and home for a calming activity, such as exercise.
- \* Listen respectfully when your partner describes sources of stress.
- \* Practice asking your partner for what you need to calm down.
- \* Reframe job stress in a positive light, as a potential source of a raise or promotion.

## **DON'T**

- \* Dump on your mate as soon as you come in the door.
- \* Assume your partner decompresses in the same way you do.
- \* Allow your evenings to be consumed by complaints about work.
- \* Assume without asking that your spouse wants you to solve the problem or give advice.