

The Joys—and Perils—of Working at Home Together

With couples suddenly turning into co-workers, they are learning new things about themselves and their partners

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Fawn and Keith Weaver spent months building a custom double-sided partners desk for their office, thinking it would be fun to sit across from each other on the occasional days they worked from home together. Then the quarantine hit.

Ms. Weaver's tendency to pace, gesture with her hands and speak loudly when taking calls became a distraction for the 48-year-old Mr. Weaver, a film executive. He quickly realized it was her preferred way to communicate. The couple decided to split up into two rooms—with doors.

"The desk and office is officially mine," says Ms. Weaver, 43, chief executive of a whiskey distillery in Lynchburg, Tenn. "There's absolutely no way we are able to share."

With couples suddenly turning into co-workers, many are getting a glimpse of their loved ones in action. Anything from amped-up leadership skills to prolific hand gesturing is on display in makeshift office setups. And even longtime partners are surprised at the personality shift that can occur between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

It isn't always a good thing.

On one hand, witnessing each other's career strengths can bring about feelings of mutual admiration and creates "a great opportunity for them to build a stronger relationship or fall more deeply in love," says Patrick Shrout, a psychology professor at New York University. But feelings of competitiveness and inequality that emerge from working side by side can also "lead to some serious conflict," he says.

Renegotiating chores

A shared office setup in Brooklyn made Elana Friedman realize she could delegate more household tasks to her husband, Andy Friedman, a footwear-company executive. Since Mr. Friedman is always laughing and joking at home, she hadn't seen him taking issues seriously before the quarantine. "I never thought my funny-not-super-serious guy has these moments of pinpoint laser focus," says Ms. Friedman, chief marketing officer at a hotel residence company.

She recently asked Mr. Friedman to take over the most serious of all quarantine tasks: lunch for their family, including two children. “I don’t mind being the lunch man,” he says. “Foodwise, we’ve taken it up a notch.”

As couples continue to work from home, renegotiating what needs to be done to keep their lives running can potentially upend traditional gender roles for heterosexual couples, says Alyson Byrne, assistant professor of organizational behavior at Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada who researches job status and female breadwinners. Today’s work setups create a greater sense of understanding and respect for what the other person is doing, which can make it easier to assign tasks related to child-rearing or taking care of elderly relatives in an equitable fashion, she says. One caveat is that women who are the main breadwinners and work outside the home may “see their gender roles being reinforced” while spending more time at home, she adds.

Stephanie Bailyn, 35, a fourth-grade teacher from Roslyn, N.Y., has eased up on the requests she makes of her husband, Russell Bailyn, 37, when he works from home. Because she never had the opportunity to work remotely until earlier this spring, she didn’t realize the intensity of his day. After witnessing his back-to-back virtual meetings, she has promised never to ask him to do the dishes during the workday or make jokes about a midday workout. “I was very jealous” that he could work from home when I couldn’t, she says. “Now I realize he’s just as active.”

Mr. Bailyn, a financial adviser, says he’s relieved she can take it all in, albeit under different circumstances. “When I’d tell her I’m having lunch with a client, it just sounded luxurious,” he says.

Others are caught off guard by their partner’s work personality.

When Steven Meyers, an executive at a language-learning company in Brooklyn, overheard his wife, Lauren Reynolds, on a videoconference call, he was taken aback by what he now refers to as her work voice. Mr. Meyers noticed that Ms. Reynolds, 33, seems more measured and overly polite when talking to colleagues. “It’s hard to describe,” says Mr. Meyers. “It’s a voice that, as husband, I’ve never heard before.”

Ms. Reynolds, who leads customer service at a health-care startup, doesn’t deny changing the tone of her voice when she is working, but says she is seeing her spouse in a different light, too. For one, she has learned he drinks coffee about five times a day. And he’s often unresponsive to any requests or interruptions during the workday. While it can be a struggle to get his attention, Ms. Reynolds also realized she doesn’t have to worry about clanking dishes or making other noises in the kitchen when her husband is working. “We could have a marching band come through,” she says.

Unsolicited feedback

In some instances, getting a glimpse into the contrast between someone’s work and home personality can be tough, says Hannah Eaton, a Seattle-based therapist who also organizes couples retreats. For instance, witnessing a spouse enthusiastically leading a conference call, while acting uninvolved at home, can make partners resentful. At home, we’re more likely to

“show our more unpleasant sides,” Ms. Eaton says. Instead, she advises couples to “save some of that work energy” for their partner.

But others may benefit from seeing their partner in action. “There can be this sense of novelty that can ultimately feed back into the relationship,” she says. A newfound curiosity about the other person’s work can create feelings that are reminiscent of dating, she says.

As partners learn about loved ones’ work styles, many can’t help but step in to provide some unsolicited feedback. After overhearing Claire Holland deal with a recent work emergency, her husband, Ben Holland, spoke up and told her she “sounded so negative” in addressing the problem. “My initial reaction was, ‘I didn’t ask for your commentary,’ ” says Ms. Holland, a 33-year-old public-relations executive in Chicago.

Mr. Holland, a 34-year-old financial adviser, says any potential criticism is coming from a good place. “Seeing her take charge of working through these tough times has been something I’m proud of her for,” he says.

Ms. Holland says she has learned to appreciate her husband’s honesty and now purposely seeks out his take on select work issues. “It’s kind of nice because your co-workers may not give you that feedback,” she says. “It’s been so eye-opening.”