

Stress-busters” for the Two-Career Family

A recipe for stress: Take one man and one woman. Add two careers, then blend into a marriage. Wait three years, then add children (one to three children, according to taste). Season well with high personal and professional goals. Serve with frantic schedules and 36-hour days.

More and more two-career couples are becoming two-career families and are “cooking up” this kind of stress. People wait longer to become married and often put off having children until their 30s. By that time both partners might be well established in demanding careers. Often they have developed a fast-paced lifestyle with long hours of work, large financial commitments and high expectations. Life is stressful, but manageable. Then comes the baby.

Most couples find parenthood a bigger change than marriage. Routines are disrupted, roles are changed and sleep becomes a rarity. Major decisions must be faced—Who should work? How much? What expenses can we cut? Do we want child care? What is “good enough” child care?

These changes create some practical problems. Parents feel the strain of too little sleep, too many responsibilities and not enough time. More subtle emotional strains might be equally powerful. A working mother, for example, might struggle with guilt about being away from her children while her husband berates himself for being unable to support his family. Sexual intimacy might decline as time pressures increase and the couple adjusts to being a threesome. Tension can erupt into anger at the spouse and marital resentments multiply.

How can the two-career family cope? Several strategies can help couples weather this change.

1. Reduce the “shoulds” that block creative problem solving:

For example, being locked into the following kinds of beliefs can inhibit creative problem-solving:

- mothers should be with their children
- women should have their own careers
- men should support their families financially
- the modern couple should have it all—love, sex, money and children

These expectations can prevent couples from working out solutions that are best for them. Instead, be flexible and creative and brainstorm the many possibilities. There usually are more than one or two options. Think more openly.

2. Emphasize cooperation instead of competition with your spouse.

Keeping mental lists of all the sacrifices you have made for your spouse is a sure route to resentment. Focus, instead, on being responsible for yourself and to each other. Families work best when goals are shared. Count everybody’s well-being in your decisions and find the common ground between individual needs and family needs.

3. Remember that no situation, good or bad, is permanent.

Children's needs change over time. Yes, they do eventually sleep through the night. Parental priorities and goals also change. Old patterns become unworkable and new possibilities emerge. It is helpful to keep your perspective and accept the inevitability of change instead of fighting it.

4. Do not focus on getting the job done so much that you forget to have fun along the way.

The 20-plus years of parenthood are far too long to endure without joy. Those who put life on hold until after the children are gone often find their marriage has atrophied. So make time to enjoy your children and enjoy your spouse as you go through the parenting years.

5. Get the help you need.

There is no rule requiring families to solve all of their problems on their own. Develop a network of friends, neighbours and extended family on whom you can rely. Learn how to ask for practical help when you need it. Find people who can give you emotional support and encouragement. Others have faced or are facing the same difficulties. If a problem seems especially difficult, consider marriage or family counselling. Families can use counselling as a tool to help them navigate situations. Life as a two-career family is never simple. It often requires exceptional creativity and flexibility. With these skills, families can change stress into an opportunity for a richer and fuller life together.