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Couples, pay attention to your relationship work ethic

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Is a date with your partner as important to you as a meeting at work? A University of Illinois study recommends that couples develop a relationship work ethic that rivals—or at least equals—their professional work ethic.

"When people enter the workplace, they make an effort to arrive on time, be productive throughout the day, listen attentively to co-workers and supervisors, try to get along with others, and dress and groom themselves to make a good impression," said Jill R. Bowers, a researcher in the U of I's Department of Human and Community Development.

Couples should be at least as invested in their relationship work ethic, prioritizing their partner and putting the same kind of energy into active listening, planning time together, finding a workable solution for sharing household tasks, and handling personal stress so that it doesn't spill over into the relationship, the researcher said.

"But that can be hard to do when you get home and you're tired and emotionally drained, and the second shift begins, with its cooking, cleaning, laundry, and the demands associated with children that compete for communication and quality time with your partner," she added.

Because effort at work is driven by pay, a person's career often consumes most of his or her attention. "The job gets all your energy, and there's little left over for what comes after. That's why you have to be

intentional about working on your romantic partnership," Bowers noted.

The researcher is the lead author of a study that evaluated Intentional Harmony, a curriculum on work-life balance for dual-earner married couples developed by U of I professor Angela R. Wiley, Kathryn R. Branscomb, and U of I Extension family life educators.

The evaluation measured the impact of attending an Intentional Harmony workshop on work-partner balance skills and strategies as well as relationship satisfaction in 47 heterosexual couples. All couples took a pre- and post-test. Half of the couples attended the workshop before the training; the others did not attend the training until after their relationship skills were assessed.

Couples who attended the workshop improved significantly in their ability to manage work-partner role conflict and other relevant skills compared to the other group, and they also reported a greater reduction in physical and emotional stress. The evaluation also found that the study was most effective for women.

Improved organizational and time management skills can help couples balance work and family commitments, but "it's complicated," Bowers conceded.

"Sharing household tasks continues to be a big concern for couples. Flexible work schedules are often advocated as a way to balance work and family commitments, but these arrangements can blur the lines between work and family time. Establishing those boundaries is difficult enough, and not having those limits can make life even more stressful," she said.

"You may not feel like you have the time or assume that everything's okay because your partner isn't complaining, but over time the

consequences of shortchanging your relationship could mean serious relationship issues, and that has real implications for your mental and physical health. That's why we advise taking your relationship work ethic seriously and making time for your partner intentional," Bowers said.

More information: "Helping Dual-Earner Couples Manage Work-Partner Interferences: A Program Evaluation" is available online at dx.doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2013.851054 in *Marriage and Family Review*, volume 50, issue 1.

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