

Stress levels for couples examined in study

June 3 2011, By Eddie North-Hager

A new study found that it isn't enough for couples to relax together for their stress levels to fall at the end of the day. Men find it easier to chill if their wives are still busy. Women prefer hands-on help: Their stress levels improve if their husbands chip in with housework.

The study, published this month in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, showed how the actions of one spouse can affect the [stress](#) levels of the partner.

The results paint a pessimistic picture of marriage, said lead author, Darby Saxbe, a postdoctoral fellow in the USC Dornsife Department of Psychology.

“Your biological adaptation to stress looks healthier when your partner has to suffer the consequences — more housework for husbands, less leisure for wives,” Saxbe said.

For both husbands and wives, doing more housework kept cortisol levels higher at the end of the day. In other words, doing chores seemed to limit a spouse's ability to recover from a day of work.

For wives, cortisol profiles were healthier if husbands spent more time doing housework. For husbands, in contrast, having more leisure time was linked with healthier cortisol level but only if their wives also spent less time in leisure.

“The result shows that the way couples spend time at home — not just the way you spend time, but the way your partner spends time as well —

has real implications for long-term health,” Saxbe said.

The study measured stress hormones and daily activities among 30 Los Angeles couples who worked full time and had at least one child. Researchers tracked the families’ activities at 10-minute intervals and sampled their saliva repeatedly over three days.

The saliva samples then were analyzed for cortisol, a hormone that increases in stressful situations. Saxbe and her colleagues focused on the drop in cortisol after the end of the workday. A steeper drop is considered healthier. The study found there was a link between household activities and physiology. In particular, the way in which [couples](#) divvy up chores affects their bodies’ adaptation to stress.

The study also found that, on average, wives spent more of their time at home doing housework, while husbands had more leisure time.

Cortisol levels can affect sleep, weight gain, burnout and weakened immune resistance.

Saxbe conducted much of the research while writing her thesis at UCLA’s Center for the Everyday Lives of Families with co-authors Rena Repetti of UCLA and Anthony Graesch of Connecticut College.

One of Saxbe’s earlier studies focused on marital relationships, stress and work. Her research found that more happily married women showed healthier cortisol patterns, while women who reported marital dissatisfaction had flatter cortisol profiles, which have been associated with chronic stress. Men’s marital satisfaction ratings, on the other hand, were not connected to their cortisol patterns.

“The quality of relationships makes a big difference in a person’s health,” Saxbe said. “Dividing up your housework fairly with your

partner may be as important as eating your vegetables.”

Provided by USC College

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