

Study documents the importance of supportive spouses in coping with work-related stress

February 16 2012

The growth of two-income families and increasing levels of job stress are two of the most significant work trends affecting American businesses and families in recent years. Having just one stressed-out spouse can harm couple's work and home lives — but what about when it's both?

A new study conducted by Wayne Hochwarter, the Jim Moran Professor of Business Administration in the Florida State University College of Business, examines the role of support in households where daily [stress](#) is common to both spouses.

"Given that a lack of support from one's spouse represents a major cause of both divorce and career derailment, this research is needed to address issues that affect both home and work," Hochwarter said.

More than 400 working couples, in both blue- and white-collar occupations, participated in Hochwarter's research. Those who reported high levels of stress but strong spousal support — as compared to stressed-out employees without such support — experienced the following positive benefits:

- 50 percent higher rates of satisfaction with their marriage;
- 33 percent greater likelihood of having positive relationships

- with co-workers;
- 30 percent lower likelihood of experiencing guilt associated with home/family neglect;
- 30 percent lower likelihood of being critical of others (spouse, children) at home;
- 25 percent higher rates of concentration levels at work;
- 25 percent lower likelihood of experiencing fatigue at home after work;
- 25 percent higher rates of satisfaction with the amount of time spent with their children;
- 20 percent higher views that their careers were heading in the right direction; and
- 20 percent higher level of job satisfaction.

The number of employees who returned to the workplace even more agitated because they were unable to generate coping support at home is particularly distressing to Hochwarter.

"When you're still angry or upset from yesterday's stress, your workday will likely go in only one direction — down," he said.

Further, Hochwarter identified key factors distinguishing favorable from unfavorable support.

"Some attempts to support your stressed-out spouse can backfire, actually making the situation much worse," he said.

Support that had a deep and far-reaching impact had several common characteristics, which included:

- Awareness of one's spouse's daily work demands (i.e., time pressures, lack of resources, deadlines, and supervisors).

- Not "forcing support."
- Understanding that communication lines are open regardless of the circumstances.
- Recognizing that distancing oneself from the family or lashing out is not a practical way to foster help. In fact, it tends to bring out the worst in others — and even causes the supporting spouse to become distant and act out as well.
- Being able to bring one's spouse back to the middle — up when down in the dumps and down when overly agitated.
- Not bombarding the family with complaints about minor workplace irritants.
- Not trying to "one-up" one's spouse in terms of who has had the worse day.
- Not being complacent — continuing to work at it.
- Remaining rational and not automatically casting the spouse as the "bad guy."
- Not keeping a running tab on who is giving and who is getting.

"Most important, though, was the ability for a spouse to offer support on days when he or she needs it just as much," Hochwarter said. "In many cases, both return home from work stressed. Generating the mental and emotional resources needed to help when your own tank is empty is often difficult. Successful couples almost always kept a steady supply of support resources on reserve to be tapped on particularly demanding days."

According to one 47-year-old sales manager interviewed for the study, "I had a horrible day, and all I wanted was a home-cooked meal and some time to myself. Instead, I took my wife out to dinner and heard everything about her bad boss and how her co-workers weren't pulling their weight. By the end of the evening, we both felt at least a little bit better."

Hochwarter also noted that the men and women differed by gender in terms of what support behaviors worked best for them. In general, wives appreciated getting "cut some slack" in terms of household activities; feeling wanted; and receiving expressions of warmth and affection. The husbands, meanwhile, were more likely to respond positively to offers of assistance with errands and feeling appreciated and needed.

Both husbands and wives, however, were especially grateful for their spouse's help in getting time away from work and home hassles to simply rest and recharge their batteries.

"When stress enters any relationship, it has the potential to either bind people together or break them apart," Hochwarter said. "Findings strongly confirm this with respect to job tension. What also became obvious was the critical role of communication and trust among spouses; without them, you have a foundation best described as crumbling, even in the best of circumstances."

Affirming that is the view of one 54-year-old administrative assistant in the study. When questioned how job stress can affect a relationship, she responded, "Ask my ex-husband."

The study is being prepared for publication.

Provided by Florida State University

Citation: Study documents the importance of supportive spouses in coping with work-related stress (2012, February 16) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-documents-importance-spouses-coping-work-related.html>

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