

Work-Life Balance

How Couples Can Find Balance While Working from Home

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Summary. Couples working from home during the pandemic face the challenge of balancing work and domestic responsibilities in a way that's fair, and so far the ongoing crisis has largely reinforced existing gender gaps in the home. The first step to reaching an equitable... [more](#)

The stress of the Covid-19 pandemic has created a volatile situation inside many homes, damaging even strong partnerships, ending others, and overwhelming family attorneys in some areas with

divorce inquiries. Balancing the demands of working from home with added domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and homeschooling is increasing the strain on couples, and researchers around the globe have found that pandemic life has exacerbated the existing domestic labor gender gap, with women reporting being far more dissatisfied with the division of time between paid and unpaid work than men.

Couples navigating this ongoing crisis should negotiate — or renegotiate — this division and how they'll manage the boundaries between work and home duties. As revealed in a book we recently edited, *Research Handbook on Gender and Negotiation*, understanding the causes of tension and bringing a few negotiation skills that are already part of your professional problem-solving repertoire into your home can improve your relationship.

Understand the Forces at Play

Conflicts around roles are amplified. Tensions between work and family roles have escalated in the absence of clear physical demarcation between work and home. When everyone and the cat shares the dining room table, work tasks intrude on domestic responsibilities and vice versa. This spillover places further strain on relationships while simultaneously reducing our ability to focus on them. Communication about needs becomes a casualty and, as scholarship explains, domestic partners revert to gender-based role expectations to resolve these conflicts.

Preservation becomes the priority. In close relationships such as domestic partnerships, we tend to place greater emphasis on protecting our relationship than on getting our needs met. We then avoid issues that should be tackled directly, or we capitulate before reaching optimal agreements. The cost of the subsequent lopsided outcome can be resentment that further fuels conflict.

We rely on mind-reading. Close relationships are also likely to amplify the “illusion of transparency,” or the assumption that our partners know how we feel and understand our needs. As a result, we

don't identify our needs explicitly but instead expect that our partner will *just know* and act accordingly. When our partners fail to meet these expectations, not only do we experience disappointment, but we may question their commitment.

Improvisation creates imbalance. When negotiating work and domestic responsibilities, we might try to solve the “who does what” problem using an ad hoc approach. For example, an urgent meeting arises, and the other partner is left to handle the childcare, or the groceries run out and the less-exhausted partner goes to the store. The problem with this kind of approach is that, over time, one partner's urgent needs supersede the other's important needs, and freedom becomes zero-sum.

Put Your Negotiation Skills to Work

Don't avoid the issues. Address small frustrations and annoyances as they occur — problems that are ignored grow and emotions that are suppressed intensify. If your partner's loud typing disrupts your work, talk about it before you break the keyboard. Individuals who treat adversities large and small as transformational opportunities are happier and healthier, and couples who reframe these moments as opportunities to share and better understand each other's needs emerge with stronger relationships.

Understand the stakes. While being accommodating creates the illusion of keeping the peace, it's beneficial only when the importance of personal outcomes is low or when we place greater importance on preserving relationships. In the home, issues often seem deceptively low stakes. Who takes out the trash, unloads the dishwasher, or walks the dog doesn't matter so much on a day-to-day basis, but if partners default to meeting the demands of the moment when both are tired and need more time for work, then sooner or later, something will break. Selflessness may be effective in the short term, but it can also generate a slow burn of resentment and affect things like your job performance, the quality of the time spent with your children, and your mental health, none of which are low-stakes outcomes. Instead

of accommodating, take time to explain what's important to you and invite your partner to participate in coming up with an equitable solution.

Resist the blame game. Criticism and blame fuel conflict and encourage argumentativeness. When tensions flare, avoid the temptation to point out and dwell on past failures and inequities. Focusing on who's done more household chores, borne the brunt of caregiving, or claimed more uninterrupted time for paid work or recreation doesn't actually resolve anything. Instead, adopt relational thinking by making problem solving, rather than blaming, central to your conversation. While calling out selfish behavior is tempting and can be cathartic, stating your needs is more effective. By recognizing the anxiety-inducing context we're living in, looking for positive explanations for a partner's seemingly self-centered actions, and affirming your commitment to the relationship, you can reimagine conflict as a problem-solving task — one you conquered together.

Maximize value with logrolling. Consider a situation where two partners are frustrated because they both believe they're doing more than their fair share of the household and caregiving tasks. Agreeing on the number of hours each person spends on household tasks, allocating equal blocks of time for caregiving, or assigning specific tasks to each partner might seem like obvious solutions, but are they the best ones? Logrolling, which capitalizes on differences in partners' preferences, can help you determine the best possible agreement given the specific context. To continue the example, if partners differ in when they work most effectively (morning or afternoon), they can maximize benefits by agreeing to take on domestic and caregiving responsibilities in their "off time" in return for uninterrupted "peak time."

Build a bridge. Finding a solution that addresses the most important needs of both parties can help partners realize even greater benefits. To do this, partners need to understand the source of each other's frustration — for example, they lack downtime, are facing overwhelming work tasks, or are worried that the kids aren't learning

through virtual school. Once these underlying unmet needs are identified, partners can work together to reformulate the problem and generate plans that fulfill them. The problem to be solved shifts from, “How do we allocate household and caregiving tasks fairly?” to “How can we effectively manage these tasks while achieving what we care about most?”

Once you arrive at a solution, beware of declaring “problem solved.” Implementing agreements always reveals roadblocks. Even in more stable times, negotiators are encouraged to build in a feedback loop to check that negotiated agreements are working well for everyone. In these highly dynamic times, this is even more important. Check in with each other regularly to make sure your arrangement is still mutually beneficial, recognize that needs will change alongside external circumstances, and be prepared to improvise and innovate.

While implementing negotiation strategies at home is challenging because we value and don’t want to disrupt our personal relationships, doing so can be transformational. Reframing negotiations as problem-solving exercises increases partners’ willingness to cooperate and “go hard on the problem and soft on the person” and conveys how much they care about their domestic joint venture. While reacting to the urgent until exhaustion sets in is understandable, a few hours of strategizing the important issues might forge a path toward a better partnership after the pandemic.

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