

Relationships



[DOMESTIC DRAMA]

Two People, One Breadwinner

WHEN ONE PARTNER WORKS AND THE OTHER STAYS HOME, RESENTMENTS MAY FESTER. HERE'S HOW TO FIND AN EQUITABLE SOLUTION. **BY DEBORAH SIEGEL**

WHEN ANALISA ALLEN and her family moved to Kenya, she stayed home with her two young children while her husband, John, guided safaris. Five years later, they moved back to the States, and she returned to work while John—who'd lost his job—stayed home with the kids.

One evening, Analisa came home to a messy house only to find a message from

her son's school saying he'd been teased for wearing a dirty shirt. "I'm the one working, so why can't I be the one taking care of?" she thought to herself. "John gets to spend more time with our children. I could do a better job of it."

While dual-career couples are the norm today, professional couples who can afford to have one partner stay home,

usually after the children are born, no longer automatically assume that person will be Mom. This can lead to multiple formulas for resentment. Breadwinner wives—still often expected by their mates to act as social director, housekeeper, and meal planner—resent husbands who are lax about household upkeep. Meanwhile, househusbands adjusting to their new

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“No one ever acknowledges that working women are **being good moms** by working.”

domestic roles often resent wives who tell them what to do. And primary earners of either sex can feel trapped by work, resentful that they didn't have the choice to stay home; or they may feel let down by partners who, once professionally ambitious, now relish their domestic identities to an alienating degree.

Anger, jealousy, and even resentment are natural in any relationship—and at times even helpful. “Resentment is one of the feelings we're afraid of, and we find all kinds of ways to avoid discussing it,” says Harvard psychologist Leigh McCullough. But feelings are signals that convey important information. “Resentment often signals some loss of one's sense of worth as a person, loss of self-confidence, or loss of self-respect,” says McCullough. At-home partners who envy working spouses may be feeling insecure about their own loss of professional identity. Meanwhile, breadwinners may feel resentful of at-home partners because they hate their jobs. The feeling can therefore serve as a guide, leading resentful partners to discover what they've lost and, ultimately, light the way toward replacing it.

Own Your Choice

IN SOME CASES, the negativity you feel toward your partner is not as much about your partner as it is about your own choices. Resentment brews in a context—one that often differs for fathers (historically, and until relatively recently, presumed to be the primary earners) and mothers (the ones still often expected to stay home, despite the reality that many don't). Societal expectations about sex roles can affect one's self-esteem, infecting even those couples who consider themselves least susceptible. When breadwinner wives envy or resent stay-at-home husbands, they're often projecting deep-seated feelings of guilt about

their own absence from their children's daily lives. “Working women aren't validated as good mothers,” says Leslie Bennetts, author of *The Feminine Mistake: Are We Giving Up Too Much?* “No one ever acknowledges that working women are being good moms, taking care of their kids, by working.”

Conversely, when stay-at-home dads envy or resent their breadwinning wives, the feeling often stems from their own sense of inadequacy. “How do you define masculinity when you're not the person who provides money for your family?” asks Gry Staalsett, a psychologist at the Modum Bad Psychiatric Center in Norway. Recognize that popular, yet ultimately narrow, beliefs about gender roles perpetuated by the larger culture don't have to define your own relationship. Accept your decision about your arrange-

ment, at least for the moment. Seek support from friends who validate your decision to work or stay home—including, of course, your partner.

Acknowledge Domestic Contributions

IN A SOCIETY that draws a bright line between professional contributions and domestic ones, couples must learn to recognize that the two arenas are interconnected. There's no reason decision-making power should rest solely with the partner who brings in the money, says family therapist Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*. When couples come to her with resentments related to the distribution of money and power within their relationships, she helps them better understand the

STRIKING a BALANCE

IF YOU'RE THE AT-HOME PARTNER

- Own the choice you've made, recognizing that traditional gender roles don't always correspond with a couple's actual competencies.
- Inoculate yourself against the loss of identity you may feel, or the isolation you may experience, by forging a strong community of other professionals who've made similar decisions to head home.
- Understand that your partner's work, while providing time away from child-care duties and household chores, is not vacation.
- Talk clearly with your partner about what's going to work for a two-year period, not just for the moment. Recognize that your current arrangement is not forever.

IF YOU'RE THE BREADWINNER

- Some resentments are unavoidable, and can convey important information about yourself.
- Be sensitive to your partner's loss of professional identity. Don't take work inside the home for granted.
- Give your partner time to adjust to new duties before swooping in to correct their parenting behavior or housekeeping style.
- Don't assume that because you earn the money, you hold greater decision-making status in your relationship.



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interlocking, complementary nature of their contributions. “Each one is facilitating the other’s ability to run their turf.”

Acknowledging that interconnection, however, is not always easy. For partners who make the shift to staying home with children after having worked in the world outside, internal conflicts can fuel the sore feelings. “Resentment can grow from the hidden mourning about the un-lived life ‘out there,’” says Staalsett. Work inside the home—caregiving and, in many cases, part-time paid work—is less valued than full-time paid work outside the home. “We live in a culture that puts more value on doing—achieving, performing, and fulfilling the American dream of success—than on being and closeness, connection and care,” says Staalsett. For men in particular, this downshift in value may come as a surprise. “It’s a double whammy for men who go home to care for kids,” says sociologist Pamela Stone, author of *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. “They’ve given up a high status role and taken on one that isn’t.”

Keep It Fluid

“THERE ARE VERY few couples that are going to come up with an arrangement that is decided at the beginning and will work for 45 years,” says Pe rel. Partners need to check in with each other regularly, make adjustments in domestic and professional arrangements, and deal with conflict early on.

Psychologist Barry McCarthy urges couples to talk about their arrangements in terms of two-year time frames. “Agree to check in every six months to see how well it’s working. You need an accountability system so it doesn’t all come crashing in on you,” he says. Talk about what happens if it doesn’t work the way you, as a couple, want it to. Have a plan B.

When resentments surface, couples owe it to themselves to consider the problem from an individual perspective (what is my resentment teaching me?) and as a unit (what might we need to adjust?). But there are times when resentments are clues to larger problems. According to John Gottman, author of *And Baby Makes Three: The Six-Step Plan for Preserving Marital Intimacy and Rekindling Romance After Baby Arrives*, there is often a deeper story behind the issues we fight about. It’s important not only to understand your partner’s feelings and needs but to grasp what your partner holds sacred—values, beliefs, and experiences. Sometimes a couple’s shared beliefs—in this case, about specialization of roles—stop being in sync. Says Gottman, “Resentments can be signs of other, more fundamental processes that are failing too, like friendship, romance, and passion.” When this becomes the case, it’s time to look beyond issues of marital organization and seek professional help.

DEBORAH SIEGEL, PH.D., is the co editor of *Only Child* and author of *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Girls Gone Wild*.