

Work stress can strain marriage

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It was persistence that led to "yes" when Leonardo Cicarelli, a charismatic insurance agency owner, asked out Candice Fong on New Year's Eve.

But Fong, a market development manager for a wireless phone company, said that when she walked down the aisle at her wedding last month, she knew her new husband's equal persistence as a business owner comes with job-related stress. "I'm going to have to help him learn to vent and move on."

As we head into summer, wedding plans kick into full gear. But before couples head down the aisle, they should know what it takes to go the distance these days. New studies by Pew Research show the divorce rate has declined over the past 20 years, but at the same time, fewer people are getting married.

Strong marriages take investment. Today, people are working longer hours, making less time for spouses and feeling too exhausted for sex. Even more, job stress, now at a high, can change the chemistry between couples, making a marriage fragile.

"A failure to give marriage top priority is a major cause of the breakdown of marriages in our country," said Larry Birnbach, psychotherapist and co-author of "How to Know If It's Time to Go: A 10-Step Reality Test for Your Marriage." "Fun and romance has gotten lost between job stress, family stress and money problems."

There are ways for new couples to avoid the work-related pitfalls that sabotage marriage.

When paths diverge: A 21st century marriage typically comes after both spouses are established in their jobs. A recent study by Pew Research shows the average age at which men and women first marry is now 28, the highest ever recorded, having risen by roughly five years in the past half-century. Because most marriages are among college-educated couples, when one partner reaches a greater level of career success, the new dynamic can open the door for resentment.

Jodi Furr Colton, an attorney with the marriage and family law group at Fort Lauderdale's Brinkley Morgan, said by the time couples arrive at her office, "they are living in two different worlds." Either or both feel dissatisfied or resentful. "It's important to communicate dissatisfaction in a way that's not judgmental," she said.

Unemployment or setbacks at work: The recession has shown Americans that even high-powered executives are vulnerable to job or financial loss. A bride or groom can no longer go into a marriage with lifelong expectations of lifestyle or job security. "A spouse will come in and say, 'When I married you, you had money and now you don't. You promised and can't deliver,'" said Furr Colton.

Division of chores: Just like in the workplace, a spouse can get resentful if one carries more workload. Newlywed Fong, 34, says she's starting now to prepare her marriage for the years ahead when kids are part of the mix. Fong and Cicarelli have lived together since August. They began divvying up the chores immediately. "We were both used to doing things on our own, so it's been a challenge," she said. "I want to work this out before we have kids."

Helen Fong, Candice's mother and a successful Miami wedding planner, says it's the sharing and working as a team that strengthens marriages. "If a bride or groom has a lot of demands and expectations, it doesn't work out."

Misguided priorities: According to a national survey commissioned by Care.com, 64 percent of working parents revealed that they are too stressed from managing their jobs and their families to have sex with their spouses. "With the stress that Americans are under today, both partners have to be committed to encouraging sex and accepting sexual advances," said Beverly Hyman, a management consultant who co-wrote "How to Know If It's Time to Go" with Birnbach.

Conflict resolution: A conflict at work, if improperly handled, can cost you a promotion or worse, your job. The same goes in marriage. Experts have found a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship. Fighting in the first year of marriage is not predictive of divorce. A University of Michigan study of 373 couples over a span of 16 years found that it's a couple's fight style that may lead to divorce. Avoid the most dangerous pattern — when one partner tries to analyze a situation or disagreement and the other withdraws.

Balance: In a 24/7 work world, boundaries keep work from spilling over at home. "It's heartbreaking when spouses get together and one has the feeling that their partner is here physically but his or her heart and mind is at office," Hyman said. One pitfall is if one partner becomes so immersed in work that he or she unconsciously sees a spouse as a source of stress, or worse, turns to work to avoid a spouse. Bringing work stress home, particularly by venting nonstop, can also be a problem.

"The ideal scenario for marriage is compartmentalizing," Hyman said. "When you are at work, work owns you. When you walk out, leave it behind."

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