



The Proper Care and Feeding of Dual-Career Couples



By Benjamin Kessler , INSEAD Knowledge

There's no single path to long-term fulfilment in love and work - as long as partners are communicating regularly on three main points.

Advice for two-career couples struggling to manage their hectic lives is usually replete with words like “balance”, “compromise”, “juggle”, “negotiate” and “fairness”. But [Jennifer Petriglieri](#), INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, offers a very different message. Her research shows that when members of dual-career couples concentrate on splitting the difference between their own and their partner's fulfilment, they deprive themselves - and their significant other - of the sense of mutual support that promotes strong relationships and careers over the long term.

Petriglieri's new book, [Couples That Work: How to Thrive in Love and at Work](#), argues that meaningful conversations, not knee-jerk compromises, are the key to lasting happiness for dual-careers. The book draws upon extensive interviews with more than 100 couples hailing from 32 countries

and ranging in age from 26 to 63.

“Couples who thrived across their lifetime developed a habit of having conversations that go beyond the practicalities,” she said in [a recent interview for the INSEAD Knowledge podcast](#). Busy couples often get understandably fixated on immediate issues – who cooks dinner, who picks up the kids, etc. “But if it were as simple as dividing the housework and syncing our Google calendars, we wouldn’t be talking today,” Petriglieri said.

Three questions for couples to ask themselves

The successful couples in Petriglieri’s book – “success” in this context translates to both partners feeling fulfilled in both love and career – regularly carved out time to address three fundamental concerns.

First, they discussed what mattered to them as a couple most of all. In addition to their children, parents, etc. this category could include “a career ambition, making time for a specific hobby, financial stability or where we live,” Petriglieri says. “These are the yardsticks by which we measure our lives. So if we’re very clear on those, it’s a lot easier for us to know, what are we going to pursue and what can we give up or put to one side, even if it costs us something?”

Second, they discussed what was off-limits for their future. Foreclosing certain options not only provides clarity for both partners but also helps narrow the potentially dizzying array of life choices available to the highly sought-after talents in this group. “For example, what are the places we’re not even going to consider moving to? What might be the amount of travel in one person’s job or the other that’s simply unacceptable?” Petriglieri says.

Third, they were forthcoming about their fears. “If we know them as a couple, we can do things to stop them happening,” says Petriglieri. “We may be afraid of one person’s career taking much more time and being much more important than the other person’s. It might be something in our personal life, like someone’s wider family encroaching upon our relationship. If we know that, we can handle it more sensitively.”

Still, couples might protest their responsibilities leave them little time for this sort of exploration. I asked Petriglieri whether she had any advice. She responded, “If we’re really invested in our relationship, we take the time. It’s not a lot of time investment. When I talk about developing this habit, I’m not thinking that people must have these conversations every night or every

week. The couples who are really into this way of relating to each other, they're talking about this stuff two, three times a year."

And the conversations themselves are not the angst-ridden, warts-and-all psychological purgations one might anticipate. "A lot of us really crave these conversations around what is meaningful to us in life," Petriglieri says. She shared the story of a couple who stroll to their local bakery every Saturday morning and sit for an hour over coffee and croissants, talking about "everything that's not logistics. Both of them said, 'It's the best hour of my week, and I look forward to it all week.'"

The partner as a secure base

When couples start to delve deep, of course, not every discovery they make will be a happy one. For example, at a moment when one member of the couple is flush with career success, their partner may feel professionally stifled or disenchanted. The zero-sum logic of compromise would demand that the less happy of the pair hold their tongue to avoid raining on their partner's parade. But Petriglieri counter-argues that the emotional experience of both partners can be validated at once. Citing a concept from an area of developmental psychology called **attachment theory**, she says, "Couples who really thrive develop this function called a 'secure base', which means being supportive, but also really pushing each other to experiment, to explore and to take some risks."

"It's a question in couples: 'Can we both support and challenge, but also pick up our partner when they fall on their face and dust them off? And can we flip this role between us, so sometimes we're the support team, and sometimes we're the one being celebrated?'"

Petriglieri suggests a similarly flexible approach to the pivotal question of which partner's career should take priority. *Couples That Work* describes three career-prioritisation models: primary-secondary (one partner's career consistently comes first), turn-taking (partners periodically trade primary and secondary roles) and double-primary (both partners' careers are roughly equally important). All three are potentially workable, Petriglieri says. But double-primary was the most common among the happiest couples she studied, precisely because of its difficulty.

"[Double-primary] doesn't mean that at any single moment they were investing exactly the same amount. Oftentimes one will push forward, and then the other one will push forward. This was possible, but it takes a lot of

juggling...I often found these relationships worked very well. The reason is, it forced couples to have these conversations,” Petriglieri says.

Her book tracks the development of dual-career couples over the course of a lifetime, yet her core recommendations are directly relevant to professionals of all ages. She says, “The most important thing to do today, tonight, next time you see your partner, is to start that journey of developing the habit of talking about the things that matter. Go home tonight, sit down with pen and paper, and spend some time on your own jotting down some notes on the three areas I mentioned.”

“And then, really honestly and openly, share those little pieces of paper with each other, and start that conversation.”

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/proper-care-and-feeding-dual-career-couples>

About the author(s)

Benjamin Kessler was the Managing Editor of INSEAD Knowledge.

About the research

This article is based on the book [Couples That Work: How to Thrive in Love and at Work](#).

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