

The Art of Mastering the Doctor-Spouse Work Team

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An increasing number of healthcare practices are owned, managed, and staffed by married couples. As doctors and their spouses merge their talents to work together, we see a frequent outcome: While the professional alliance is financially and strategically sound, the nonstop reality of living and working together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week is putting a strain on the personal relationship. Following are five steps to make the alliance succeed—at work and at home.

Key words: Spouse; married couples; medical practice; relationship; work.

I, Wendy, take you, Hal, to be my husband . . . to love and to cherish . . . to have and to hold . . . in sickness and in health . . . and in filing . . . and in processing insurance claims . . . and in managing staff . . . and in filing tax returns . . . and in cleaning the kitchen . . . and in making dinner . . . and in emergency phone calls . . . and in walking the dog . . . and in firing staff . . . and in marketing the practice . . . and in constantly talking about, worrying about, and scheming about WORK, WORK, WORK, every single minute of every single day as long as we both shall live!

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Is it possible to work together and still maintain the spark that brought you together as a couple? Is there a way to comfortably toggle from “equal” to “subordinate” as you go from home to work and back again? Is there a strategy for giving and taking direction that won’t leave either of you feeling “one-down?” Is it possible to spend an evening out without talking about work? Is it possible

to get past the years you’ve spent focusing on everything and everyone but you?

Yes, 24/7 works—when you know what to do.

I fell in love with a private practice doctor. He fell in love with the president of an international training and consulting firm. To the outside world, we were highly competent professionals. To each other, we were just two people who happened to fall in love. We went to dinner and the movies and walked along wonderful little streets filled with unique boutiques. We held hands, we smooched, and we couldn’t stand to be apart for more than a few minutes. We were head over heels in love.

“Wouldn’t it be great if we worked together? Then we wouldn’t have to be apart!”

It was a great idea. We would merge our talents and skills to create a better business—one that would allow both of us to grow our individual areas of expertise, while enjoying the benefits of partnering with a professional we trusted. We were going to be successful and in love and together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

We couldn’t stop talking about our new venture. We sat for hours making lists. Soon our walks down the wonderful little streets led us away from the boutiques as we began to notice rental spaces that would be perfect for us. Our cozy, romantic dinners included spreadsheets and legal pads. Our pillow talk was about marketing our new practice.

We were now much more than romantic partners. We were business partners. We had become more than lovingly entwined. We were strategically interdependent.

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We were more than married, we were incorporated! Our days were very long, but we were together for every waking moment of them. Our dream had come true. We had a 24/7 marriage.

Little by little, our dream became a nightmare. As our practice expanded, we were spending all of our time focused on others, and none on each other. Our training business took off at the same time, and the demand on us became overwhelming. It was too much for us to handle alone. We needed staff. We needed space. We needed more equipment and supplies. There simply weren't enough hours in the day.

It was time to divide and conquer. I would handle the training piece of our business, and he would go back to seeing patients alone. The 24/7 was a great idea, except it was limiting our accessibility. And, after all, the goal was success.

Our business and our practice were doing well, but our marriage was paying the price. We would smile at each other from across the room as he walked a patient back to his office. We would steal a silent hug while I was on the phone with a client. He did the dishes while I stayed up until 4:00 a.m. developing workshops.

Our cozy romantic dinners became Chinese take-out. Our conversations were all about work.

But we were a team, and our business was a success! Were we still in love? Sure! Of course! Absolutely! Well . . . honestly . . . who had time to think about that?

We did. We thought about it a lot. And then we found the solution that allowed us to have it all.

STEP 1: START BEFORE YOU NEED IT

A marriage is like a beautiful house—the more time you spend in it, the more lived-in and tired it becomes. Of course, you don't always see the normal wear and tear on your house—sometimes you're too busy, or too comfortable, or too preoccupied. Sometimes you're just too close to it. Ironically, sometimes it's strangers who notice the deterioration of your home long before you do.

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Think of this as you would an annual physical examination or a maintenance check on your car. You

wouldn't think of driving your car for more than 12 months without getting a safety check. So, once a year, give your marriage a detailed inspection. If you look closely enough, you'll find little areas that need your attention. Remember: it's never a marriage that fails, it's we who fail when we forget to keep a watchful eye and attend to the details of our marriage. Figure out what needs tweaking in your marriage, and set it as a high priority that you will attend to together.

STEP 2: LEARN A NEW LANGUAGE

If you are going to make changes in a relationship, the first place to start is always communication. Take a close look at how you communicate with each other.

If you're like most 24/7 couples, you've developed a strong affinity for sticky notes, emails, and text and voice messages. You've become efficient in your communications. You've learned to leave out details and present the high points.

Perhaps you've developed some of the other habits of communication efficiency, such as: commanding, rather than requesting; dictating, rather than including; assuming, rather than investigating; and deferring, rather than reaching consensus. If you're an over-achiever, you may have achieved efficiency by keeping all of your thoughts to yourself and simply taking everything onto your shoulders.

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If your top two goals are “time-saving” and “conflict avoidance,” it's time to learn a new language. You've already proved that you can shift your language by moving your personal relationship into the work setting. The key is to find the best way to talk to each other so that you are productive and respectful of your work relationship, while always maintaining your connection personally.

The most complicated part of this process is to realize that you are *both* going to have to change if you are going to find a new way to communicate. Be accountable to your partner, and admit to the parts of the puzzle that you've created.

Find out what each of you needs so that you can listen and be heard. Take a page from neuro-psychology, and recognize that your communications needs may be different as a result of your brain wiring. Review your social-psychology, and understand that your upbringing has contributed to what you expect and need from a partner now. Distinguish your opinions from the facts. Describe your feelings, rather than expect the other to read your mind.

Above all, remember that men and women have different distributions of white and gray matter—we think differently! Learn your partner’s language, and resolve to speak it.

STEP 3: RESOLVE RESENTMENTS

You don’t like the way your spouse manages the paperwork. Your spouse thinks you are too nit-picky. You wish your spouse were a better motivator of people. Your spouse wishes you would stop worrying about the people so much! You started out in total agreement about who would be in charge of what. Now those boundaries have blurred.

You’ve never really forgiven him for the time he . . . You still get enraged when you think about the time she . . . And don’t forget the time that . . . The old cliché “you always hurt the one you love” has a basis in truth in your marriage. It all just keeps piling up like a bunch of old newspapers. You mean to throw them away, but you just don’t ever get around to it. Until finally, they’re too heavy to lift.

In a standard marriage, you have 8 to 10 hours a day apart from each other when you are at work. During that time, you have an opportunity to laugh off the little things that irked you that morning. You can blow off steam by complaining to your colleagues. By the time you get home, you have long forgotten that little thing, and you can’t wait to see each other.

In a 24/7 marriage, you don’t get that space. There is no time to distance yourself from the problem, and you certainly can’t talk about it with your teammates. To compound it all, you continue to step on each other’s toes all day long. At the end of the day, you’re driving home together.

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“So, what do you want for dinner?” you ask.

“I don’t care. Whatever you want is fine,” she/he replies.

That’s the final straw. All of the things you’ve held in for the entire week come screaming to the surface. Instead of being heard with an understanding ear, however, you are met with a barrage of faux pas and blunders that *you’ve* made that week. It’s a competition: Who can top the other with tales of errors in behavior, judgment, communication, and memory. All venues are fair game:

work, home, his family, her family. There seems to be no end to the list of things you’ve each been stockpiling.

In the movie “Love Story,” the lesson the married couple learned was “love means never having to say you’re sorry.” That may be true in Hollywood. But in a 24/7 marriage, love means *constantly* saying you’re sorry! But if you wait until you have a shopping list of your spouse’s mistakes, missteps, misunderstandings, and miscalculations, there are too many things to apologize for! The end result is you get a generic “sorry” that won’t scratch your itch.

Make a pact with your spouse right now: agree to discuss the little things within 24 hours so that they don’t pile up. Learn how to listen to your mate’s anger, as well as how to talk about your own. Create a code that you can use at work in front of others—the code will say “we’ll work it out and get through it.” Your staff will thank you!

STEP 4: DESIGN YOUR LIFE

When you first agreed to work together, you had a picture of what it would be like. Maybe you both agreed wholeheartedly to the dual roles you would play as marriage and business partners. Perhaps one of you agreed to “help out for a little while,” and now, 10 years later, you are desperate for a reprieve. Of course, it’s entirely possible that you’re both very happy working in the practice, but your children are all grown, and now it’s time to consider a way to use your free time together.

The point is, most 24/7 couples don’t take the time to design their lives together. Instead, they live their lives by default, reacting to each event as it occurs, putting out fires, creating new opportunities, and never stopping to say, “Is this how we want to live?”

Now is the time to design your life. Take a weekend together, and devote it to planning out the rest of your life together. Look at every possible area of your life and spell it out—what do you want, and how will you make sure you get it? Commit to making your design a reality.

STEP 5: LAUGH

If you never master Steps 1 to 4, then at the very least do this step. Realize that 24/7 couples have a different kind of stress than do other married couples. The fastest cure for that stress is laughter. Laugh together, laugh daily, laugh at home, laugh at work. Make a decision that you will find ways to make each other laugh every day. In the process of laughing, you will find the boy and girl that fell in love originally. Keep them both alive, and your relationship will flourish—24/7. ■