

From Corporate America to Owning a Business



[The Wall Street Journal](#) (July 2015) – It is awful to see your spouse under stress at work. It is worse still to have to hear about it every night.

Partners want to be able to talk and hear about each other's work lives, but complaining about problems at work can morph into a rant, robbing a partner of rest and relaxation. Negative emotion spilling from work into home life can actually make job problems worse, research shows.

Mike Fisher took comfort in talking with his wife Julie about heavy stress on a previous job years ago, when a new boss was showering him with criticism. "Julie would hear about it every night when I got home," he says.



Julie listened to Mike's complaints about a stressful job, until it began hurting his health. Then, she helped him decide to buy and run his own business.

Ms. Fisher admits she sometimes tuned out, but she also listened and encouraged him. When Mr. Fisher developed high blood pressure and ulcers, she helped him decide to quit, telling him, "It's not worth it. Life is too short," says Ms. Fisher, who now works with her husband in their own business, **Our Town America**, a Tampa, Fla., direct-marketing company.

Complaining becomes a problem when it goes on too long, says Patricia Pitta, a Manhasset, N.Y., clinical psychologist. Most job troubles aren't easily resolved, yet "the person who's in distress just wants to keep talking about it because they're feeling so uncomfortable. And before you know it, it's 10 p.m.," she says.

A negative mood can be contagious. Marie Osborne says that when her husband Nathan often came home frustrated and angry from a previous job several years ago, she sometimes felt like snapping at him. "You sometimes want to just say, 'Quit your job!'" says Ms. Osborne, a San Diego blogger on family and faith. She made an effort to be empathetic, reminding herself that her husband had supported her during difficult times in the past, and her husband soon found a job he likes.

Spouses often want to give advice. Kathy Murray, a former chief financial officer,

used to respond to her husband Doug's complaints about his job years ago by telling him to network more or knock on more doors, says Ms. Murray, of Santa Ana, Calif.

Mr. Murray says that wasn't helpful. He respects his wife's skills, but she didn't understand his work as a financial-products sales representative. "I'd come home from work trying to figure out how to hold it together until the next paycheck, and instead of having a cheerleader, I'd have a coach," Mr. Murray says. He began retreating alone to his man cave in the garage to watch TV.

Ms. Murray says she learned to stop giving advice and start listening to her husband with empathy. Mr. Murray says her support lent him confidence and helped him become successful on the job.

"There's an enormous temptation to step in and fix it somehow," when that is not what a mate wants, says Laura Doyle, a Newport Beach, Calif., relationship coach whose book, "The Surrendered Wife," helped Ms. Murray change her behavior. Listening and simply saying, "I hear you," satisfies a spouse's "deep need to be heard and understood," says Ms. Doyle.

Showing empathy doesn't mean you agree or that you're obligated to do anything different. It just means you "get it." Feeling understood often helps people feel stronger or see new solutions. While research links unhappy marriages to increased anger at work, employees in happy marriages aren't as affected emotionally by negative work events, according to a 2015 research review of 85 studies by researchers at the University of Georgia.

Brandon Tenney hated seeing his wife Miranda unhappy in a job at a manufacturing plant, says Mr. Tenney, president of MilliCare, a commercial carpet and textile-cleaning company in Omaha, Neb. He encouraged her to "stick with it and you'll get through it," reassuring her that she wouldn't have to stay in the job for long. Ms. Tenney says she was comforted. The experience motivated her to support him in buying his own business in 2012, and she later joined him there as chief executive.

A spouse should ask a mate's permission before switching to a problem-solving role, says David Maxfield, a vice president at VitalSmarts, a Provo, Utah, research and training firm, and co-author of three books on influencing others' behavior. "Sometimes the spouse will say, 'No, I have it all worked out,' and sometimes

they'll say, "OK, that's exactly what I need," " he says.

Some spouses find themselves in the awkward position of wanting to side with the boss who is angering their mate. Doing so is likely to put the partner on the defensive. "Happy couples cultivate an us-against-them mentality," says Joshua Coleman, co-chairman of the Council on Contemporary Families, a nonprofit research group. Attempted solutions should be delivered gently, such as, "I'm not sure you're hearing it in exactly the right way," says Dr. Coleman, author of "The Marriage Makeover."

Take a neutral approach by asking questions such as, "What do you think your boss was thinking?" or, "What could cause him or her to do that?"

Psychologists advise setting limits on time spent complaining; recommendations vary from 5 to 30 minutes. A listening spouse should speak up when feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, Dr. Pitta says.

After work, "people should avoid coming in right away and dumping on their mate," says Kathy Dawson, a Cleveland relationship coach. Take a few minutes to change clothes or relax.

She also counsels couples to ask each other whether it is a good time to talk and to learn to describe problems briefly. "It takes practice to get good at saying what's really bothering you" in just a few words, she says.

When Patrick and Annie Flaherty's relationship was strained by talk about work, Ms. Dawson coached them to check in with each other before venting. "At night, I can turn and look at him, or he'll look at me and say, 'No business. I need an hour,' and there's no penalty. I don't feel shut down, and he doesn't feel shut down," says Ms. Flaherty, who works with her husband in a Kent, Ohio, technology company they own.

They often defer talking about issues to a weekly meeting they hold, usually on Sunday. And Ms. Flaherty has learned to describe what is bothering her in just a few words, rather than "going on and on," which in the past caused Mr. Flaherty to fall silent and withdraw emotionally.

Getting out for a run also helps. They meet after work on a path near their office, and Mr. Flaherty runs six miles, Ms. Flaherty three. Sometimes they stop for dinner or a beer afterward. By the time they get home, work stress has taken a back seat.

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