

## Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



### Fact Sheet

## Building a Strong Marriage—Finding Time

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With today's busy lifestyles, there are many demands for a person's time. Work, family responsibilities, community involvement, and time for self make it difficult to juggle these different roles. With this multitude of demands, many couples may have difficulty finding time to spend with their spouse.

In his book, *Take Back Your Marriage*, Dr. William J. Doherty states that "many of us, especially when we are raising children and have busy jobs, live our marriages with a chronic sense of deficit about the time we spend together as a couple," and that "competitors for our daily time are far more assertive than we are about our marriage" (p. 61).

### Work Demands

It is not uncommon for both partners to be employed outside the home. Many couples work long hours both during the week and on weekends. A spouse may have little control over the number of hours he or she works in any given week. For example, a person may be asked to work overtime to complete a special project or may be called back to work again. As a result of demanding work schedules, some couples may feel as if they are not spending enough time building and strengthening their marriage. Doherty suggests that it is helpful if partners can share their feelings. If the spouse who works long hours is able to share feelings of wishing the situation was different and missing his or her partner, the couple may feel more connected.

Another work-related situation is bringing work home. A spouse may have come home from work, but finds the responsibilities of the job have come home too. Partners may need to share work-related experiences in the "safe" environment of their marriage. Perhaps some time spent in conversation with a spouse will help put the work world aside, so the couple can transition into time for the marriage and family. There may also be times when a spouse needs to work at home. Once again, a conversation about why it is necessary to occasionally work at home is helpful so a spouse can understand.

### Parenting Demands

Children are an important part of families, but parenting responsibilities can limit one-on-one couple time. According to Dr. Kerry J. Daly's study of dual-earner families, parents' needs and satisfactions tend to take a "back seat" to the demands and needs of their children. Parents spend time caring for their children, participating in children's activities, assisting with school work and projects, and playing games to name only a few. Although parents value the pursuit of "quality" family time, their children's needs and desires frequently set the agenda for how this time is spent. Thus, while spending time together as a family is important, it is equally important to spend time together, alone, with one's partner. Make conscious efforts to set aside time or make "dates" to connect regularly.

## Community and Personal Demands

Another commitment for individuals is time spent in community activities, such as religious activities, clubs, and organizations. Such commitments may take time away from one's marriage. Doherty suggests that partners may be able to participate in the same community activities. It is also helpful if partners support their spouse in the activities they choose to pursue. Balance is essential.

Individual hobbies and recreation are additional time commitments spouses must balance. Doherty suggests couples should talk about their hobbies and personal recreation choices with their spouse. Couples may be able to work out a plan that allows them to spend time with each other, while at the same time allowing each partner to pursue his or her own interests. Negotiation and compromise may be necessary.

Television viewing may also keep couples from spending time together. It is easy to become interested in a program and not want to be interrupted until there is a commercial. One suggestion that may help couples deal with the amount of time they watch television is to purposefully select programs they wish to watch and turn the television off when they are not actually sitting down to watch the selected programs.

### Coping With These Demands

With this multitude of demands, how can couples cope with the variety of time demands they face and still find time to spend with their spouse?

- Communication is very important. Couples should not assume that their spouse will understand the reason they are not spending time with them. Talk about the reasons. Feelings about not being able to spend time together need to be shared. Even when it is impossible to change the

circumstances, it helps to know why and understand how each partner feels.

- Schedule time to be together. For some, it may be necessary to pencil in "dates" with their spouse. Others may find it offensive to treat their marriage with such formality and wish to be more spontaneous, choosing instead to spend time together when the time is right. No matter which alternative is chosen, it is important for couples to spend time with their partner doing something that is enjoyable to them both.
- Establish marriage rituals—everyday activities that are repeated, coordinated, and significant. Examples of marriage rituals are a cup of tea after the children go to bed, a morning walk before the children get up, or a hug and a kiss upon returning from work.
- It may be helpful for couples to take time to purposefully look at the variety of commitments they have. They also need to look at what is truly important to them and spend their time on the things that are the most important.
- Don't be afraid to say "no" to a request that takes time. When a person says "no" to one commitment, it means there is more time for something else.

While it is easy for the demands of daily living to take precedence over one's marriage, it is important for couples to communicate with each other and to jointly determine ways to strengthen their marriage.

### References

- Daly, K. J. (2001). Deconstructing family time: From ideology to lived experience. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63(5), 283-294.
- Doherty, W. J. (2001). *Take back your marriage*. New York: The Guilford Press (pp. 61-72 & 125-136).

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