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ARTICLE **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

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by Jennifer Petriglieri

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A little more than two months after the start of China's coronavirus lockdown, just as restrictions are easing, a startling new figure has emerged: The divorce rate in the city of Xi'an, the heart of the Shaanxi Province, has [spiked](#). The numbers from Italy are not yet available, but the jokes abound.

“You’ll either come out of this with a third child, or with a divorce,” quipped one of my Italian relatives as France, where my husband and I live, followed Italy into an open-ended lockdown. Four days into it, I can see why.

In my work researching [dual-career couples](#) I’ve seen how even with a lot on their plates, couples can thrive in both their careers and their relationships. But now millions of dual-career couples across the world are, [like us](#), finding themselves in a situation that a month ago seemed inconceivable and are navigating it without a road map: both partners forced into working full time from home. Many of these couples also have to care for children full time with little or no support because of strict social-distance guidelines.

Work itself is much more stressful than usual — as our face-to-face work moves online, our organizations struggle to serve customers, and our job security itself becomes uncertain — and so there is plenty of frustration and anxiety to take home. And now it *is* home: Our homes have become the spaces where we deal with these challenges. With no clear division of labor between paid work and housework, dual-career couples are facing a host of new and unfamiliar challenges. How can both partners work productively under the same roof? Who gets to use the home office, and when? How can we avoid falling into the trap of overwork and burnout that is prevalent among home workers? How can we deal with each other’s mildly annoying habits that when lived with 24/7 suddenly become bones of contention? And, for those who are also working parents, how do we keep the kids occupied and homeschooled, with no friends, grandparents or paid childcare givers to help?

Most of the advice I’m seeing in response to these questions suggests that couples need to focus on the practicalities: Schedule your days. Never work at the kitchen table. Close the door to your home office. Divide the chores. Talk to your boss. Alternate shifts between childcare and work. Take regular breaks. Don’t lose sleep. Leverage technology.

These practicalities are clearly important and all couples, indeed all workers, will need to make serious adjustments. But my six years of research has taught me that what determines which couples will go their separate ways when the crisis ends and which will have a second honeymoon period (and perhaps a third child to boot!) will not be how they deal with the practicalities. It’s not about who will brave the pandemic to go out and buy milk.

Instead, my research — for which I’ve interviewed more than 100 couples — shows that the couples who survive crises with their relationship and careers intact are those who discuss and agree on certain principles as the crisis begins. These should capture what matters most to them, what they need and want to achieve, what they need from each other, and what they must give in return. It’s these principles that, once set in an agreement, drive the practical solutions they adopt as the crisis unfolds. This “crisis deal” is based on the [couples contract](#) that I describe in my book [Couples That Work](#) as vital for all dual-career couples to thrive. But couples can’t just set a contract once and be done: they must adjust the deal when major changes arrive — especially when a crisis hits.

It doesn't take long to figure out a crisis deal. You can do it tonight with your partner. First, take a few minutes individually to jot down your thoughts on each of the questions set out below. Consider a time horizon of three months (at this point we don't know how long the situation will last, but this is my educated guess based on China's experience). Once you've gathered and written down your own thoughts, share them with your partner point by point and work together to find common ground. Write down what you agree on. This will make your crisis deal a living deal that you can revisit every week to make sure you are on track. You can also look to the agreement as the basis for the practical problems that you will need to tackle next.

What matters most to you in this period? The easy answer for all of us is the health and safety of our loved ones. But beyond this, what are your top three goals for this time? Is there a particular work project you want to see through to completion? A relationship you want to foster? Do you want to use the time at home to map out your next career transition? Is the your kids' education top of mind?

Understanding and sharing these goals is important because it is the best guide to how to divide up your time. It's likely that most of us will be less productive on any given front during this period. But imagine yourself looking back three months from now: What are the yard sticks you will use to measure whether you spent your time wisely?

What is the relative priority of your careers over the coming months? If you're both working from home and simultaneously managing other commitments like child and elder care, you will need to figure out whose work gets priority when. Do you have a stable deal in which one of your careers consistently takes priority over the other? Do you try to maintain a 50/50 split? Or are there certain weeks when one of you will need to have priority over working time?

My research has shown that any one of these arrangements can work — but it works best if you decide in advance which one you're following. This can give you some logic to use as you split up each day's working hours between you. If you understand why each other's work needs to take priority at certain moments, it's easier to accept the sacrifices you'll both have to make in this period without building up resentments.

What are your parenting principles during this period? These are extraordinary times for working parents, and the principles we usually stick to will need to adapt. Do you need to loosen screen-time agreements? How involved in homeschooling do you want and need to be? What are the aspects of your children's lives that are most important to you? Outdoor time, reading time, sports, study? How will you talk about the crisis and contain your children's anxieties? If you and your partner are on the same page and can communicate these adjusted principles clearly to your children, it will make keeping the boundaries (and peace) at home that bit easier.

What do you need from each other to make this all work? We are all craving support, but what does that look like for you? Emotional or practical? Do you need to know that you'll have 15 minutes of undivided attention every evening to check in and debrief the day? Do you need your partner to

share some of the tasks that you usually take full responsibility for? What do you need from your partner to help you stick to your crisis deal? It's likely that you and your partner will need different things from each other. Adapting to your partner's needs demonstrate the goodwill and love we'll all need to make it through these times.

What are the things concern you most? The crisis and the reality of working from home for an extended period provoke [anxiety](#) in most of us. Do you worry about your job security? Managing the boundaries between work and kids? Getting quality couple time? Cabin fever setting in? What will you do if one or both of you become seriously ill? In times of crisis many of us adopt a stiff-upper-lip stance and bottle up our concerns. This is not helpful within a couple. Understanding each other's key concerns is critical, because it makes us more attentive and sensitive. And when we understand our partner's concerns, we can take practical steps to soothe or mitigate them.

Faced with a crisis, our focus often narrows to the immediate tasks at hand. As one woman I spoke to remarked: "It's easy for this situation to put you in task mode. I'm realizing, though, that we need to figure out a new deal to get through it." My research concurs: Couples that work are those who put their deal first. Only then do they move onto the practicalities.

As long as the principles you agreed to in your deal serve as the logic for your practicalities, and as long as you keep that conversation alive, you'll get through this period — and perhaps your relationship will be even stronger. Wedding bells may sound, a second honeymoon might get booked, or tiny clothes may get knitted — at which point you'll need to negotiate another deal!

Jennifer Petriglieri is an associate professor of organisational behavior at [INSEAD](#) and the author of [Couples That Work: How Dual-Career Couples Can Thrive in Love and Work](#) (Harvard Business Review Press, 2019). At INSEAD she directs the Management Acceleration Programme, the Women Leaders Programme, and the Gender Diversity Programme.
