



NHMRC FAQ

**Frequently Asked Questions:
Work Arrangements and Marriage**

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Research-based answers to important questions related to forming and sustaining healthy marriages.

Work and marriage are two very important parts of adult's lives, and sometimes the demands of one can interfere with the demands of the other. Work-spouse conflict occurs when the pressures from one role make it hard to be successful in the other role.

In these FAQs, our focus is on how work arrangements affect this work-spouse conflict and marital satisfaction. Work arrangements include how many hours people work, when they work (e.g., regular day shift, night shift), and flexible work arrangements.

These FAQs answer some common questions about work arrangements and marriage, using findings from scientifically sound research. Research doesn't have all the answers, but it can shed a great deal of light on many questions.

Questions:

- Q1. What is the percentage of married couples today with both spouses in the paid work force? What is the percentage with just one employed spouse?**
- Q2. What employment factors influence marital satisfaction and divorce? And how do these factors influence marital satisfaction and divorce?**
- Q3. What is shift work? And how does shift work affect marriages?**
- Q4. What is flexible work? And how does flexible work affect marriages?**
- Q5. Does work affect marriage or does marriage affect work? Or does the relationship go both ways?**
- Q6. How do wives' work hours affect marriages?**
- Q7. How does the division of housework and child care affect marital satisfaction and conflict when both the husband and wife are working outside the home?**

Q1. What is the percentage of married couples today with both spouses in the paid work force? What is the percentage with just one employed spouse?

A1.

- *Dual-Earner Couples.* In 2004, both the husband and wife were employed in about one-half (51 percent) of married-couple families. This proportion increased to 61 percent for married-couple families with children. It may be more likely for both spouses to work in families with children because of the added financial pressures associated with child-rearing. ¹
- *Husband-Earner Couples.* In about 1 in 5 (21 percent) married-couple families, only the husband was employed in 2004. That proportion increased to about 1 in 3 (31 percent) for married-couple families with children. ²
- *Wife-Earner Couples.* In about 7 percent of married-couple families, only the wife was employed in 2004. This proportion dropped to about 5 percent for married-couple families with children. ³
- *No-Earner Couples.* Neither spouse was employed in about 1 in 5 (21 percent) married-couple families in 2004. (Many of these couples were retired. But it is possible that some other family member was working.) Only 3 percent of married-couple families with children were in this situation. ⁴

Q2. What employment factors influence marital satisfaction and divorce? And how do these factors influence marital satisfaction and divorce?

A2.

- *Work hours.* Generally, spending more time on the job is associated with an increase in work-spouse conflict which, in turn, is associated with less marital satisfaction. This is especially so when people are working more hours than they desire. The conflict also intensifies when people are working more hours than their spouses would prefer. Still, research findings on the effects of increased work hours are mixed. While some research indicates that wives' increased work hours were associated strongly with a greater likelihood of divorce, other research suggests that husbands' increased work hours actually lowered the risk of divorce, even when husbands were working overtime. So it may be important to consider whether it is husbands' or wives' work hours that is at issue to understand the effects of increased work hours on marriage. Also, differences in findings may reflect differences in approaches taken in studies. Some studies look at dual-earner couples, while others may look at couples in which only one spouse is working. ⁵
- *Work schedule.* The scheduling of hours plays a significant role in marital satisfaction and divorce. Generally, research suggests that traditional Monday-through-Friday daytime jobs lend themselves to greater marital satisfaction and stability than do other schedules. However, other research suggests that individuals with flexible schedules have greater marital satisfaction. (See questions 3 and 4 below.) ⁶
- *Control over scheduling.* Much of the research on job flexibility finds an association between increased

flexibility in work arrangements and less work-spouse conflict. Having control over when and where one works also can greatly decrease the conflict between work and marital responsibilities. Job flexibility has been linked with positive outcomes for both family life and work. Much of the research indicates that having control over work scheduling is a stronger predictor of less marital conflict than are the number of hours worked or the actual timing of that work. ⁷

- *Job commitment.* One study suggests that the combination of job commitment and a level of control in one's job can serve as a predictor of marital satisfaction. People who were highly committed to both their jobs and their marriages had little work-spouse conflict if they felt that they had control in their jobs. However, individuals who were committed to their jobs but felt that they had little control over their work showed higher levels of work-spouse conflict. ⁸

Q3. What is shift work? And how does shift work affect marriages?

A3.

- Shift work is defined as work done outside of the standard Monday-through-Friday daytime work schedule. Shift work can include evening work, night work, and rotating schedules. Work is generally classified as evening if it is performed between 4 p.m. and midnight. Night work is generally performed between midnight and 8 a.m., while in rotating shift, work hours change periodically from daytime to evening or night. Split shifts are when work hours are performed in two distinct periods each day. Weekend employment is work that is done on Saturday and/or Sunday. ⁹
- In 2004, about 15 percent of Americans who were employed full time worked non- standard shift schedules rather than standard daytime schedules. ¹⁰
 - o 5 percent worked evening shifts.
 - o 3 percent worked night shifts.
 - o 3 percent worked rotating shifts.
 - o 3 percent worked other employer-arranged irregular schedules.
 - o About 1 percent worked split shifts.
- Reasons that people worked these non-standard hours were as follows: ¹¹
 - o More than one-half (55 percent) of all shift workers said they did so because it was simply the nature of the job.
 - o 12 percent did it out of personal preference.
 - o 8 percent did it for better family or childcare arrangements.
 - o 8 percent did it because they couldn't get any other job.
 - o 7 percent did it for better pay.
 - o 3 percent did it because it allowed time for school.
 - o And 6 percent did it for some other reason.
- Some research indicates that in most married-couple families, only one spouse works non-standard shifts. In families with such "split-shift couples," husbands and wives have work schedules that don't overlap. These couples have reported spending less time together and having greater difficulty planning family

activities.¹²

- Non-standard shift workers often find it hard to meet their spousal responsibilities at home, which can lead to marital stress.¹³
 - o Husbands may have a hard time feeling that they are protecting their families because they are not home in the evening or night hours. They also may feel that they are not available enough as sexual partners and companions to their wives.
 - o Wives working shifts struggle to complete household tasks such as cooking regular meals, doing the laundry, and taking care of the children.
- One landmark study found that fixed night shifts were related to increased marital separation or divorce. While about 1 in 10 of all the couples in the study had separated within about five years, 16 percent of couples in which the husband worked fixed nights experienced separation or divorce within five years. And 28 percent of couples in which the wife worked fixed nights experienced separation or divorce within five years. When wives worked rotating shifts over fixed days, the odds of separation or divorce increased 150 percent.¹⁴
- Weekend employment by either the husband or wife was not related to odds of separation or divorce.¹⁵
- Among couples married less than five years, husbands who worked fixed nights were 2.3 times more likely to have experienced separation or divorce within five years than were husbands who worked fixed days.¹⁶
- Among couples married more than five years, wives' work schedules were associated with the likelihood of separation or divorce. Couples were 2.8 times more likely to have separated or divorced within five years when wives worked fixed nights, compared with when wives worked fixed days.¹⁷
- This same study also found that shift work is more disruptive for couples with children.¹⁸
 - o When couples with children were married less than five years, they were 6.5 times more likely to have experienced separation or divorce within five years when fathers worked fixed nights, compared with fixed days.
 - o When couples with children were married more than five years, they were 2.8 times more likely to have separated or divorced within five years when mothers worked fixed nights, compared with fixed days.
- Some people wonder if spouses in troubled marriages are more likely to move into shift work. This same study explored this question but did not find any evidence to support this possibility. In other words, people who start working nights or on rotating shifts generally do not have lower-quality marriages.¹⁹

Q4. What is flexible work? How does flexible work affect a marriage?

A4.

- Flextime is the ability to rearrange one's work hours within certain company guidelines. Flexplace is being able to control to some degree where one's work is done, such as from home.²⁰
- Researchers continually have found that greater flexibility in the timing and location of work helps employees better balance their responsibilities at work and in their marriages.²¹
- In 2004, more than 27 million workers had flexible work schedules that allowed them to vary the time that

they began and ended their work. ²²

- o 28 percent of employed men had flexible schedules.
- o 27 percent of employed women had flexible schedules.
- o 29 percent of white workers had flexible schedules.
- o 20 percent of black workers had flexible schedules.
- o 18 percent of Hispanic or Latino workers had flexible schedules.
- In 2004, people in certain job types were more likely to have flexible schedules. ²³
 - o 37 percent of workers in management, professional, and related occupations had flexible schedules.
 - o 30 percent of sales and office workers had flexible schedules.
 - o 18 percent of natural resources, construction, and maintenance workers had flexible schedules.
 - o 14 percent of production, transportation, and material moving workers had flexible work schedules.
- Although more than 1 in 4 workers was able to work flexible schedules, only about 1 in 10 was enrolled formally in an employer-sponsored flextime program. ²⁴
- Because formal programs are not all that common, one study sought to look at the flexibility individuals felt that they had in their jobs and how this related to balancing work and family life. This study found that people who felt that they had more flexibility in the timing and location of their jobs experienced less conflict between their work and their marriage. ²⁵

Q5. Does work affect marriage or does marriage affect work? Or does the relationship go both ways?

A5.

- Most researchers have only studied the association between work and marriage; they have not measured cause-and-effect relationships. Even though causation is uncertain, researchers do think that work and marriage affect each other. For instance, having an argument with one's spouse before heading to work may decrease one's productivity at work for the day. This situation illustrates one way that marital relationships can affect work. An example of work affecting marriage would be if a person has a very busy day at work and comes home too tired to engage in household tasks or meaningful interaction with a spouse or children. ²⁶
- One study suggested that the link between marital satisfaction and job satisfaction went both ways. But the stronger relationship was for marital satisfaction to influence job satisfaction (greater marital satisfaction was associated with greater job satisfaction). Greater job satisfaction did predict greater marital satisfaction, as well, but this relationship was weaker. ²⁷

Q6. How do wives' work hours affect marriages?

A6.

- Research has found that women's increased work hours are associated more highly with divorce than are men's. One study found that while husbands' increased work hours lessened the likelihood of divorce during the first years of marriage, wives' increased work hours increased that likelihood.²⁸
- Researchers have offered a few explanations about why the increased work hours of women are associated with increases in divorce.
 - o Women's work hours may conflict with traditional marriage norms in that working women are not at home to assume many of the traditional female household responsibilities. This absence may increase conflict about the division of household labor, and may also decrease husbands' marital satisfaction, leading to greater marital instability.²⁹
 - o Women's work hours also may be more of an issue about earning money than an issue about not spending as much time at home. When employment earnings allow women to support themselves, divorce begins to seem like a better alternative for couples already in conflict. Thus, working women may feel a sense of independence and may be more likely to leave unhappy marriages. Indeed, a study based on a national sample of wives did find that wives who were less happily married were more likely to shift into full-time employment over the course of the study.³⁰
 - o Women who enter the work force may do so because the couple is in financial need of a wife's earnings. These financial problems may be more of the reason for marital instability than are the actual work hours of the wives. Also, men with working wives may feel as if they are not fulfilling their roles as primary breadwinners, which may lead to dissatisfaction for both husbands and wives, increasing the risk of divorce.³¹

Q7. How does the division of housework and child care affect marital satisfaction and conflict when both the husband and wife are working outside the home?

A7.

- Researchers consistently have found that husbands and wives experience more conflict about the division of household labor than they do about paid work.³²
- Research is somewhat mixed on whether men are more involved in household work when their wives are employed. Some research suggests that husbands do somewhat more housework and child care when their wives are employed, but all the research finds that wives still continue to do the largest part of the housework, regardless of their own or their husband's employment. On the other hand, research indicates that men are more involved around the house than in the past and contribute a substantial amount of household labor, especially child care (although not as much as wives).³³

- Even though men may be contributing more household labor, however, the tasks husbands take on tend to have more flexibility in when they can be done, such as mowing the lawn or fixing things around the house. Wives, in contrast, are usually responsible for tasks that must be done at certain times, such as fixing meals and helping the children with their homework. ³⁴
- Researchers have found that the attitudes about gender roles and fairness are more important to marital satisfaction than is the actual division of labor. Couples who have a traditional view of gender roles are less likely to experience conflict when the wife is performing most of the household duties. Couples who have a more egalitarian view of gender roles are more likely to experience conflict when the wife is performing most of the household tasks. One recent study found that, overall, wives were happiest in relationships that combined both traditional and egalitarian views. That is, wives were happiest when husbands were involved in some of the household tasks, but were still the primary breadwinners and were strongly committed to the marriage. ³⁵
- The division of housework and child care seems to predict marital satisfaction better for women than it does for men. One recent study found that wives who were either unconcerned about the equal division of household labor or thought that the division was fair reported greater satisfaction with the love, affection, and quality time spent with their husbands. Wives who reported that the division of household labor was unfair were somewhat less happy in their marriages and were more likely to be dissatisfied with the love, affection, and quality time spent with their husbands. ³⁶
- One study found that the wives' dissatisfaction led to marital conflict when wives felt that they were doing more of the household work than they wanted and felt that their husbands were doing less of the household work than the wives preferred. Husbands did not show this pattern. Time spent on household work was not associated with dissatisfaction for husbands. In sum, wives who felt the division of household labor was unfair experienced more marital conflict. Husbands' perception of the inequality did little to predict marital conflict. Research continues to support the evidence that wives' dissatisfaction with the division of household labor is related to marital conflict. ³⁷

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