

Married and Working Together



Practitioner spouses can enjoy the best of both worlds.

by Jack Sommars

Close to half of marriages are doomed to divorce, and most small businesses fail within 4 years. Yet, despite these daunting odds, many married couples achieve lasting success and happiness as owners and co-workers at veterinary hospitals.

How do they do it?

The key is setting boundaries, says Jep Enck, MS, a consultant who specializes in communication, conflict resolution and stress management. “Married couples need to have an understanding [about] when it’s appropriate to talk about business and what times are off limits,” says Enck.

Enck and his wife, Gail, worked together when he started his consulting business. “Our rule was that we would catch up on things during dinner, but, afterwards, no more talking business.

“And it’s best to set these rules and discuss these issues before you’re having problems, not while you’re grappling with them,” he adds.

“We’ve learned you need to keep work at work and home at home,” says Scott Stonebrook, practice manager. Stonebrook and his wife, Toni Barnes, DVM, own West-side Veterinary Clinic in Flagstaff, Ariz.

Live separate lives

“There are two different relationships, and you have to try to keep them separate. I consciously don’t bring things up



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—Billy Griswold, DVM

at home, even though I want to discuss them, because it is often difficult to find free time at the clinic. But I’ve discovered that things almost always can wait until the next morning,” Stonebrook says.

Enck suggests the rules between working couples shouldn’t be any different from those between regular employees.

“When you ask people what makes for a good manager or supervisor, the overwhelming response is, ‘They set clear expectations,’” he says. “That’s true whether it’s your spouse or any other employee.”

“It’s really a systems issue of ‘Are we family?’ versus ‘Are we co-workers?’” says Carin Smith, DVM, practice consultant and author of *Team Satisfaction Pays: Organizational Development for Practice Success*. “And while married couples think they can separate the two, it’s not their perception that counts, but that of their team.

“And don’t think for a second your staff is going to let you know if there is a problem,” she cautions. “No one would say something negative about a spouse of an owner, no matter how nice you are or how much you have a warm, fuzzy feeling at your practice.”

Smith says teams often become dysfunctional when staff members “triangulate” the married couple.

“That’s when a person pits one spouse against the other,” she explains. “The spouses often let this happen when one is a good listener and the other is more avoidant.”

It’s similar to children manipulating their parents, according to Kathy Marshack, PhD, PS, a psychologist and family/business coach.

Avoid becoming parent figures

“Adults working in a family business are going to react unconsciously to a husband and wife as their mom and dad,” Marshack says. “And it doesn’t matter if the employee is older than you are. You still represent mom and dad because they are reacting to the husband–wife interaction and the fact that you are the

authority figures.”

“Owning a business together is a lot like having kids. It brings out your philosophical differences and magnifies them,” says Billy Griswold, DVM, who, along with wife, Karin Burns, DVM, owns Priority Pet Hospital in Gilbert, Ariz.

“This can work to your benefit if you’re committed to working on those differences, or doom you if you aren’t.”

The best way to avoid triangulation and the “mom and dad syndrome” is to focus on clear processes and organizational structure so everyone knows what to expect, Smith says.

“If everyone knows how things are organized, what their job descriptions are and what the performance evaluations take into account, there will be less chance of confusion.”

Taking a more formal approach can also help.

“Our newest veterinarian is much younger than we are and has remarked at how formal we are with each other,” says Stonebrook. “I still refer to Toni as Dr. Barnes most of the time when talking to staff.”

“We respect each other’s professional positions,” says Cindy Houlihan, DVM. Houlihan and her husband and practice manager, Joel LaBo, own The Cat Practice in Birmingham, Mich.

“We avoid undermining or second-guessing decisions the other makes. We’re not always perfect, but we try to live by this. Each of us has an area that we have responsibility for, and we try to avoid crossing over and micromanaging the other,” Houlihan says.

Putting on a “united front” regarding personnel issues is important, says Lynette Lee, practice manager. She and her husband, Mike Lee, DVM, own the Animal Medical Center of Deer Valley in Glendale, Ariz.

“We learned early on that when we disagree over an employee, it can cause problems,” she explains. “If one of us feels an employee needs a warning, we have to support the other person 100%, even if we don’t agree completely.”



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Keep a professional distance

“Because of this, we tend to have a professional distance with our employees,” Lee adds. “We care about them and their well-being, of course, and try to make it a nice place to work. But we do not befriend them, as a rule. We have to be able to be objective and make the tough decisions at times.”

But someone has to be the ultimate boss, says Scott Hermanson, business manager of Scottsdale Cat Clinic in Scottsdale, Ariz. Hermanson’s wife, Judy Karnia, DVM, is co-owner.

“Though we are both heavily invested in the practice, it’s important for me to remember that this is Judy’s practice and she, ultimately, has the final say,” he says. “Because Judy is the veterinarian, it’s easier for me to allow her to be chief executive officer. It may be harder on her, however, because she has more of the pressure.”

Doctors Griswold and Burns have a written “tie-breaker” system for resolving tough decisions.

“We agree on clear roles at work and who has the ‘tie breaker’ in a particular area, such as medical protocols, human resource issues and finance,” explains Griswold. “Our job descriptions actually delineate who has primary responsibility for what and establishes who gets the final word, if we can’t reach an agreement on a critical decision.”

And when all else fails, they turn to their practice’s mission statement.

“This is our most important touchstone when we can’t agree on an issue,” Griswold says. “We go back and re-evaluate the options and choose the one that best serves our mission and aids progress toward achieving our vision.”

Enck says conflicts at work between married couples should always be discussed in private, not in front of other staff members.

“These are crucial conversations that don’t always go so well, especially when there’s an audience,” he says.

Marshack notes, “It makes sense that if you work side by side with your

Maintaining a Balance

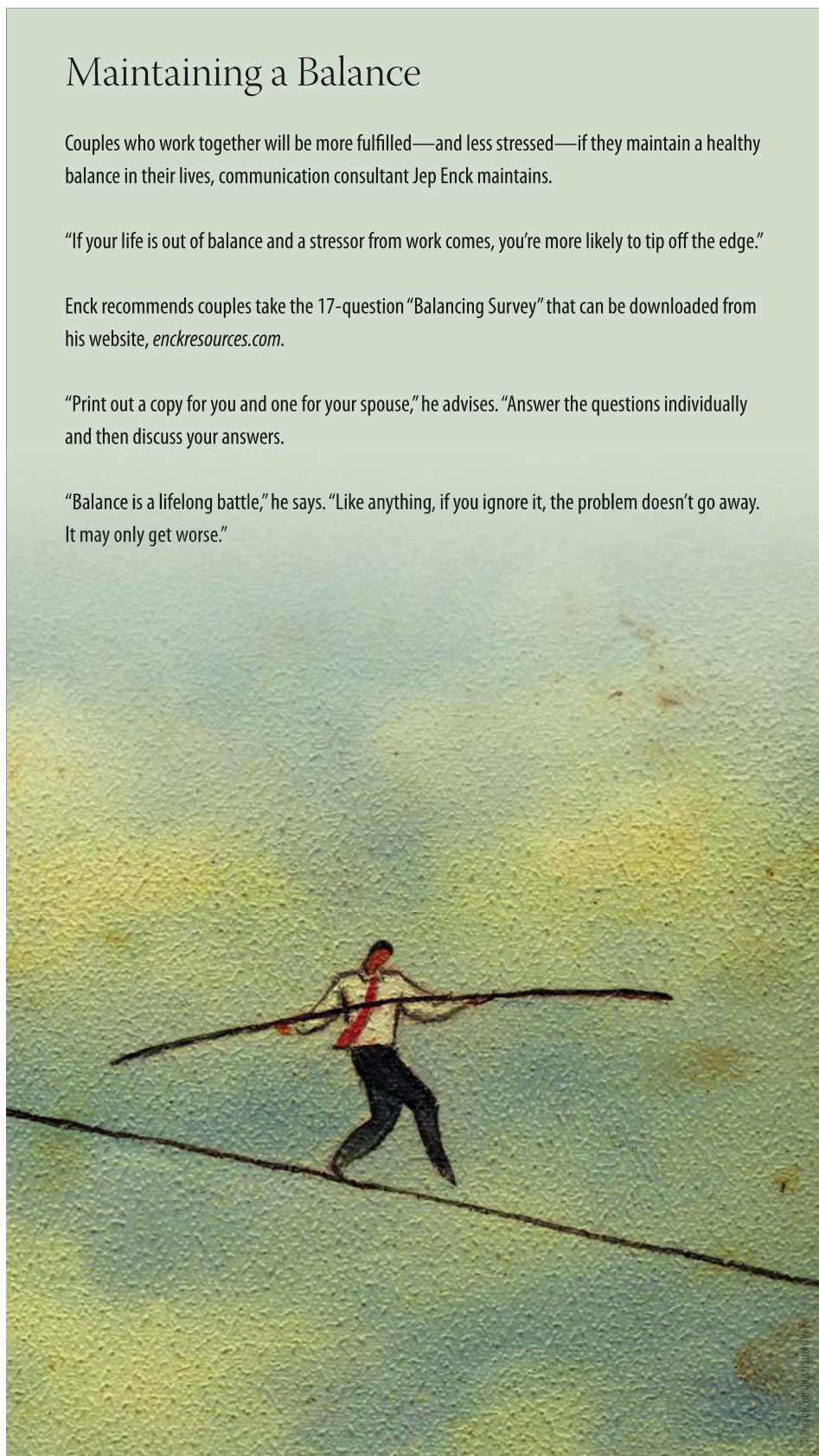
Couples who work together will be more fulfilled—and less stressed—if they maintain a healthy balance in their lives, communication consultant Jep Enck maintains.

“If your life is out of balance and a stressor from work comes, you’re more likely to tip off the edge.”

Enck recommends couples take the 17-question “Balancing Survey” that can be downloaded from his website, enckresources.com.

“Print out a copy for you and one for your spouse,” he advises. “Answer the questions individually and then discuss your answers.”

“Balance is a lifelong battle,” he says. “Like anything, if you ignore it, the problem doesn’t go away. It may only get worse.”





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—Jep Enck

spouse, there are more opportunities for conflict. But if you’re patient, don’t take it personally and communicate with one another, you can usually work things out.

“Successful couples who work together have a code they follow that nothing is worth destroying the one you love.”

Hermanson adds, “I think it’s also important to remember that the success of the clinic does not equal the success of the marriage.

“We’ve been fortunate that our practice has been succeeding in spite of the economic downturn, but even in times when it hasn’t been smooth, we’ve tried to keep that uncertainty apart from how we see our relationship.”

Put the marriage first

“You have to put your marriage first,” says Lee. “Mike and I have said from the very beginning that our marriage was more important than anything, and that if working together caused problems for us at home, we would not do it. It would not be worth it.”

When problems arise that affect your practice and marriage, Enck says to seek outside help. “If your X-ray machine breaks down, you don’t hesitate to bring in an expert to fix it. Yet when married couples are having problems, they are reluctant to seek help.

“This can be fatal to the marriage and the entire hospital. Relationships between people are far more important than any other aspect of a business.”

That third-party helping resource could be an executive coach, a management consultant or, depending on the severity of the situation, a marital counselor.

Enck also suggests working with a mentor or a mentoring couple.

“Talk to other successful married couples who work at veterinary practices. Learn from them. And you just may be inspired by them, too,” he says.

“I have about four different mentors in my life at any given time—people who are further along in an area I’m interested in. The reason I ask for their opinions is because I don’t have enough time or money to make all the mistakes myself.”

Marshack says it’s a myth that married couples who work together experience higher stress and are more likely to get divorced. “If these two people worked in separate companies, they would bring that work stress home with them, too. It’s just a different kind of stress,” she says.

“Yet, for some reason, many people think, ‘Working together would destroy our marriage!’ But, you know what? So does remodeling a house.” ■

Jack Sommars is a Denver-based freelance writer.

When “Mom and Dad” are to Blame

What should you do if you work for a married couple and they are the problem?

“Ask to meet with them both at the same time,” advises consultant Carin Smith. “But, before doing so, you should practice what to say in a nonthreatening manner, using ‘what’ and ‘when’ but not ‘why’ because ‘why’ invites defensiveness.

“The key is to focus on the process, not the people. No matter what the practice size, if systems are not in place, you are stuck with guessing about how and why decisions are made, and guessing usually leads to perceptions of unfairness, which often leads to looking for another job.

“Before doing so, ask about helping the couple create systems so staff members know what to expect. Offer to gather information, like examples of job descriptions, performance evaluations or whatever is needed.”