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Many spouses will dine alone

Erratic schedules rob time for romance

On a bitterly cold night last week, Lisa Yourman was keeping vigil with her chronically ill daughter when she received a surprise call from her husband.

It was welcome contact after days of schedules always at odds. And while Yourman would finally see her husband in person, there would be no warm embrace.

He drove up in the tractor-trailer he uses for work, stopped outside the New York City hospital where she was, and honked from the street. He couldn't park, so they remained separated by six stories and a glass window pane.

"I looked out the window and waved," said Lisa Yourman, 47.

The Yourmans have passed each other in the night for 24 years, tethered by overloaded, erratic work schedules and two teenagers with cystic fibrosis. Valentine's Day for them is less about long romantic dinners and more about an opportunity to catch up on bills — if they see each other at all.

Growing numbers of couples must juggle long hours and less traditional schedules, making Valentine's Day — and, at times, their relationship — an afterthought. They must ping-pong between running the house and caring for children, often leaving little time to nourish a marriage. And as more women are career-oriented, some professionals have trouble maintaining relationships at all.

But there is hope, therapists say, when busy couples can negotiate responsibilities and carve out time for each other. But experts still worry that children are affected by their parents' anxiety or split-shift marriage.

"The concern is that if a child does not see their parents together enjoying each other's company ... what will they then look for in a relationship?" asked Tamara Shulman, a family therapist in Clifton.

Every class of worker is seeing more pressure to work longer, untraditional schedules, research shows. About two in five employed Americans have varying schedules, with a third working weekends, according to research by Harriet Presser, a professor and author of "Working in a 24/7 Economy."

The erosion of traditional blue collar jobs like manufacturing has forced many lower-skilled workers to juggle several positions, economists say. Self-employment is growing — where the responsibility often never ends — and professionals are



always reachable on cell phones. Nearly half of workers are contacted by their employers during off hours, according to the Families and Work Institute of New York City.

"That 9-to-5 thing with dinner on the table at six has gone away," said Andrea Wasser-Malmud of New Bridge Services, a mental health center based in Pompton Lakes.

Moms are increasingly out of the kitchen and in the office. More than 56 percent of married Passaic women with children worked in 2005, just shy of the 58 percent of working women without children, Census Bureau statistics show.

Jennifer Bellome and her husband, of Rockaway, have always worked. She scaled back her hours slightly after having two children, but their schedules have never matched. He returns late at night from work at an Essex County jail, and she's up early for her nursing job in Wayne. Often, they are only together in sleep.

"The bonding time is far and few between," said Bellome, 35.

For weeks on end, Kimberly Bunyan, of Haledon, feels like a single parent. Her husband, a pilot, works seven days straight before returning home. Once he's off to the Bahamas, there's no bringing him back.

"He's totally gone," said Bunyan, 38, who works, cares for their 4-month-old, and does all the chores in her husband's absence. "It's tough. I feel lonely."

Mothers are not sacrificing time with their children, and fathers are becoming more involved in childrearing, research shows. But people are cutting back on sleep, self-care and time with their spouses in the scheduling crunch. Two-thirds of those surveyed in 2002 said they didn't have enough time with their spouse, up from half in 1992, the Families and Work Institute found.

"The toll is being taken on relationships in terms of mood and energy," said Ellen Galinsky, an Institute founder and national expert on family time constraints.

The Yourmans have gone through "bumps" in their relationship but are held together by devotion to their children. Last week, they took turns on hospital watch with their daughter or playing with their son. At no point were they in the same room.

"This is a long stretch," Yourman said, sipping coffee near New York-Presbyterian Hospital, where her daughter lay in bed. "His hairdresser sees him more than I do."

Children know when their parents feel strained. Sixty percent of young people surveyed by Galinsky said the thing they want most from their parents is not more of their time, but to see them less stressed. "Kids are watching like detectives to see how relationships work," Galinsky said.

Bellome, the Wayne nurse, does worry that her children rarely see her and her husband together. But she rattles off the many positives of two incomes: they have more economic security and Bellome is personally fulfilled.

"Being at home is absolutely more difficult than being at work," said Bellome, as her children raced around. "Work is my away time. It lets me play with adults."

Couples are increasingly sharing roles, with dads tucking in their children and moms servicing the car. After leaving his teaching job, Alan Branigan, of Nutley, cooks dinner at least five times a week for his wife, a lawyer, and two young children.

"You have to get out of the stereotype that men don't cook or do laundry," said Branigan, 32. "If they



want the best for their kids, then mom has to work a hectic schedule and be respected in the work force.”

Those arrangements help a couple succeed if they are negotiated mutually, therapists say. But that communication wasn't happening for Ann Marie Shearn and her husband because they both worked 60-hour weeks in the competitive pharmaceutical field.

Last year, Shearn, 27, and her college sweetheart divorced. Their scheduling constraints were part of the problem, she says. "We would have 15 or 20 minutes together, then go to sleep," Shearn said. While open to marrying again, Shearn will wait until her career "chills out a little bit."

Women are choosing to marry later, with an average age of 26 and 30 for professionals, according to Stephanie Coontz, a professor and author on family trends. People now spend half their lives out of wedlock, with marriage becoming less tied to economic security, Coontz said.

Still, 90 percent of Americans eventually marry, Coontz said, and local couples all have developed ways to cope with their schedules. The Bellomes order takeout when time is short. The Branigans rely on in-laws and grandparents for child care. Muna Mustafa, of Clifton, accompanies her boyfriend on his business trips.

Richard Kessler, a psychologist in Little Falls, advises his clients to negotiate their responsibilities, even if they defy normal gender roles. And couples need to make some alone time.

"We encourage the use of baby sitters. The healthy thing is to ... go out on a Saturday night," said Wasser-Malmud, of New Bridge Services.

Yourman knows she'll have more time with her husband when her children are grown. But for now, there are long absences and the challenges of making family decisions without being in the same state.

"(My son) will say, 'But daddy said I could,'" said Yourman, about when her husband approves play dates over the phone without her knowledge. "And I'll say, 'But daddy's not here.'"

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