



FACT SHEET

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WOMEN AT WORK—THEIR DUAL ROLE

Today, the majority of American women are employed. In fact, the majority of American women have **two** jobs—a job outside the home plus the job of homemaking. Most of us find one or both of our jobs worthwhile and rewarding. But the combination can be too much. Trying to fill our “double roles” can lead to frustration, exhaustion, and genuinely hazardous levels of stress.

This factsheet is about the stress of the double role—what it can do to us, and what we can do about it. But first, we need to dispose of some myths about stress.

Myth 1: Only top executives, who have lots of decisions to make, experience stress.

Not so. Recent studies show that workers who do not have much control over their work may experience the most occupational stress: For example, assembly line workers who have to keep up with the speed of the line, or clerical workers who have to meet several people’s deadlines in the course of a workday.

Myth 2: Housework is not stressful.

Again, not so. Most housework involves doing something that will soon be undone by someone else—a setup for constant frustration. Housework is lonely work and seldom appreciated by family or friends (they notice what we didn’t do, not what we did). Full-time homemakers are more likely than other people to suffer from serious depression.

Myth 3: Stress is all in your head. It’s your own fault if you let things get to you.

This is probably the most dangerous myth of all, because it keeps people from trying to

change the things that are causing stress in their lives. It’s true that we all have our individual reactions to stressful conditions, and that some of our reactions are not very helpful. But many times it’s the conditions that have to be changed—not us.

WHAT STRESS DOES TO US

- A brief stressful event (such as a scolding by a supervisor at work, a family fight) causes certain definite physical changes in each of us: Faster heart beat and breathing, a tightening of the stomach, dryness of the mouth. These changes are usually short-lived.
- Exposure to stressful conditions over a period of weeks or months can lead to the development of stress-related illnesses or symptoms. Different individuals have different reactions. Some common illnesses and symptoms include: Insomnia, headaches, backaches, stomachaches, toothaches (from grinding the teeth), spasmodic pains in the neck or shoulders, menstrual irregularities, diarrhea, loss of appetite. Some women develop recurrent vaginal or bladder infections.
- Exposure to stressful conditions over a period of years may lead to serious illness. Asthma, ulcers, colitis, hypertension, and coronary heart disease are diseases in which stress is thought to play a major role.

Some ways of responding to stress—like smoking heavily or drinking to relax—create new health problems. Women are more likely than men to overeat in response to stress, often

skipping breakfast or lunch and then eating excessively in the evening.

Women's magazines are full of suggestions for new ways of coping with stress, from yoga to special "high stress" diets. Some women find these very helpful (especially if unhealthy responses like drinking and overeating are getting out of control). But there is no "cure" for the effects of stress. If we want to make our lives less stressful, we have to get at the causes of stress. For women in the "double role," this means making some changes in our jobs—**both** jobs—and how we respond to them.

REDUCING THE STRESS OF HOMEMAKING

Women often feel that if they were only more organized, housework would be easier. But there is no magic "system" which can help a woman get it all done effortlessly *and* hold down her other job, *and* be a responsive wife and mother, etc., etc. Because one woman just can't do it all! The first step towards easing the stress of the double role is to get the rest of the family to take over their share of the homemaking role. Here are some suggestions:

- Have a family meeting to divide up the chores. Let everyone start by choosing what chores they would **like** to do. If the division doesn't look fair, someone is going to have to do something they don't like to do—but that doesn't always have to be you.
- Don't stop at dividing up the chores. Specify how **often** they have to get done (otherwise they may never get done).
- It's hard to delegate tasks you may have been doing for years. You may have an impulse to do someone's chore for them so that it will be done "right." Don't! Let them learn to do it right—or relax your standards a little.
- Remember, supervising everyone else (or scolding them because the job's not done) is work too. If you find yourself doing too much of this kind of work, it may be time for another family meeting.

None of this is going to be easy. But as you begin to get some time for relaxation—and the children begin to show some pride and

responsibility about their work—you'll know it was worth it.

REDUCING STRESS ON THE JOB

Stress on the job can come from many sources: Speed-ups, boredom with repetitive tasks, anxiety about being able to do the job well, harassment by supervisors or even co-workers, fear of being fired or injured, or worry about what the children are doing while you're working. A major government study has shown that women clerical workers are most likely to develop heart disease if (1) they have difficult bosses, (2) they feel a lot of anger which they are unable to express, and (3) they have family responsibilities in addition to their jobs. Based on this and other studies of occupational stress among women, here are some suggestions:

- Try to develop friendly and supportive relationships with the people you work with.
- Don't keep your anger bottled up. It may not be possible to yell back at a boss or supervisor, but you should be able to get things off your chest by talking to a co-worker. She (or he) is probably angry about the same things too.
- Finally, and most important: **Organize** to change the things that are making the job so stressful. One person can't do much, but a number of people acting together can accomplish a lot. If there's a union, become active in it. If there isn't, think of getting organized or building your own employee's association.

PERSPECTIVE

Jobs are not designed for women with family responsibilities. Work hours don't fit in with school hours, and certainly not with school holidays. Very, very few American employers provide daycare for the preschool children of their employees.

And communities are not designed for women with job responsibilities. Schools expect mothers to be available (for conferences, to provide lunches) between nine and three. Many stores close early in the evening, leaving almost no time for working mothers to shop.

But there are 45 million women in the

"One of the most stressful things about our job at the phone company was the 'clacker' that would start going CLACK CLACK CLACK whenever all the incoming lines were busy. The idea was to make us work faster. But it would make my stomach tie into knots and my hands got sweaty whenever I heard that thing. So one day I got a big group of us to go into the supervisor and say that we just couldn't work like that. There were so many of us that he had to give in."

shop steward, CWA

workforce today, and 15 million of them are the mothers of children under 18. The great majority of working women either provide income which is essential for their families or are the sole support of their families. Em-

ployers, law-makers, and government agencies are going to have to face up to the needs of America's growing numbers of women in the "double role."

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for a conference on:

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And What You Can Do About Them"

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health specialists (in preparation)

● **Professional assistance**

If you have a question about your work and your health, or if we can be of assistance to your group, please contact us.

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