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Put Some Space In Your Retirement Togetherness

By Ellie Thomassen

He's sitting reading the newspaper.

She's dashing around the house getting ready for their dinner guests: last-minute dusting, setting the table, laying out cocktail napkins and nibbles, and cooking.

What's simmering isn't just on the stove.

And it's not just about this particular evening.

It's about a perception of life in marriages after a husband retires. Do husbands and wives look at things differently? How do you prepare for life after the gold watch and the retirement party?

While most pre-retirement planning offered through the workplace emphasizes the financial side — insurance, pensions, investments and benefits — little or no preparation or counseling is provided about how you're going to live happily with this person you've seen only in the evening and on weekends for the past 20-40 years.

Gail S. Eisen, Ph.D., set out, over five years ago, to explore the changes within marital relationships following the retirement of husbands. She surveyed and personally interviewed 112 men and women, 56 couples in which the husband had retired from a full-time occupation at a large organization in Michigan or California within the previous six to 20 months. The average age of participants in her study was 62 years.

(She didn't focus on retired women because of the difficulties in obtaining a large enough sample of "women-as-retirees"—although their numbers in the population are still fairly low, that pattern is expected to change within the next decade.)

Eisen discovered distinct gender differences about how men and women regarded changes in personal freedom, the quality of personal time, requirements for personal space and privacy, and level of activity in retirement.

Women, she found, overwhelmingly described decreased freedom, disruption of personal routines, a shrinking of both physical and social space, and activity constriction relative to men.

Two key issues seemed to emerge following a husband's retirement:

- Tension centering around the division of labor in the home; and
- Losses in personal freedom and privacy.

"There's potential for conflict to develop over the division of labor," Eisen says.

"Women's sense of order and responsibility remains the same, but men now have more freedom."

That perception of a lack of sharing can create a source of frustration, Eisen says.

"A lot of women expect a more egalitarian pattern now that the husband has an additional 40-60 hours a week.

"What I found was that women's activities are not so different in retirement. They still have nearly full responsibilities around the home. And in some cases wives workloads actually increased when the husband retired.

"One woman's husband began demanding three regular meals a day at set times."

With two people now living at home full time, housework can increase but husbands tend, in general, not to offer to help out.

Eisen, currently a consultant and trainer for companies and universities in the area of older workforce issues and the psychology of retirement, works with all categories of retirees, from assembly-line workers to managerial and executive-level staff, and professionals of all backgrounds.

And she is sometimes surprised at what she hears from her workshop audiences.

"One woman had heard the results of my study (about conflict over the division of labor) and said she really didn't see why it was so complicated.

"The husband and wife should sit down together, she suggested, and list the tasks they feel comfortable in doing.

"Or they should make a list of all the things that need to be done over a certain time period, say a month, then both the husband and wife should divide the chores according to their personal interests. But it's got to be 50-50."

Eisen agrees with that: "It sets equality as the base line."

And, she adds, it's not just a matter of wives' grumbling.

Sometimes, men feel overburdened by their wives' expectations. He has free time now, she's thinking, he's a good carpenter. So she draws up a list of projects she wants him to do. He feels overburdened by these demands because what he wants to do is have some time, finally, to relax.

Another significant issue surrounds the wife's perception of a loss in her personal freedom and privacy.

A majority of both husbands and wives told Eisen they participated in more activities as a couple in retirement. But the women expressed negative reactions to these shared activities at rates consistently higher than men.

Why?

Sometimes husbands urge their wives to "drop what they're doing" to go somewhere and do something, while the wives don't understand why "it" can't be done later or planned in advance, Eisen told the Los Angeles edition of "Senior World."

"One wife said that she felt guilty about spending time with her friends: 'I feel more constrained about seeing my friends that are not our friends,' she said.

"One major trend I discovered," says Eisen, "is that women tend to accommodate their personal schedules to their husbands' and their routines become disrupted.

"One woman stopped attending her exercise class and curtailed her community activities in order to spend time with her husband and his new pursuits in retirement."

Another woman experienced a loss of freedom when her husband became increasingly dependent upon her after he retired.

"He developed a habit of continually following her around the house as she performed her cleaning or cooking tasks. He would carry a couple of magazines or newspapers with him. If she was cleaning the living room, he'd sit on the sofa and read. When she finished there and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner, he'd take his magazines and newspapers and sit at the kitchen table. He wanted to be close to her. Yet he had been very independent prior to his retirement and active in a number of community organizations.

"But the minute he stopped working this changed. There was a dramatic change in the level of his independence."

Eisen, whose seminars and teach-

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ing focuses on the entire range of psychological and social issues associated with retirement, offers concrete strategies for helping retirees cope with these issues.

But there is a caveat: "Above all else, much depends upon the historical nature of the marital relationship, the pattern of communication, listening skills and the degree of mutual respect and caring that exists," Eisen emphasizes.

Her tips for making a smoother adjustment to retirement:

- Plan early, and plan together, with each partner being given an equal voice.

- Understand your own, and your partner's, spatial needs and try to respect individual needs for privacy.

- Consider the possibility of architectural changes in the home, such as converting an empty bedroom into a study, a workroom, or a music listening room.

Eisen recalls one woman who told her how she solved her frustration with a husband who loved to play music...loud. She had a sound-proof listening room built in the basement just for him and his music.

- Contemplate ways of replacing work-based friendships well in advance of retirement.

One husband in her study told Eisen he felt it was important to reach out to young people. Such inter-generational contacts and stimulation are important in retirement.

- Consider renegotiation of at least some aspects of the household division of labor, so that wives are not saddled with complete responsibility for domestic tasks.

- Allow time for individual activities in retirement.

Eisen especially likes this quote from Khalil Gibran's "The Prophet" to emphasize her point:

"Let there be spaces in your togetherness."

Actively employ separation strategies, Eisen says.

Examples of such "separation strategies" run the gamut from couples who enroll in different adult education classes and then discuss what they've learned afterward to something as simple as moving a television or stereo to another location in the home.

One husband who missed work organized a group of retirees and men still working who met every Thursday noon for lunch to discuss what was going on at work and to give the retirees a sense of continuity in their lives.

That strategy also gave his wife a few hours each week to do her own thing.

- Take time to really slow down and devote more attention to your feelings and the reactions of your partner.

Eisen has presented seminars and workshops in a variety of settings, including Hughes Aircraft and Ford Motor companies, Warner Lambert-Parke Davis Pharmaceuticals, the City of Los Angeles, A.A.R.P., the University of Michigan, and the United Auto Workers.

Although she does not engage in personal counseling, she is available to work with groups. She may be contacted in Ann Arbor by calling (313) 741-8126.

What's Leisure Got To Do With It?

By Ellie Thomassen

"What will I do with all that time?"

Many pre-retirees worry about the unstructured time they see looming in their futures after they leave the job.

They're not quite sure how to handle leisure, notes Gail S. Eisen, Ph.D., a consultant and trainer for a variety of companies, universities and non-profit agencies, specializing in older workforce issues and the psychology of retirement.

North Americans, in particular, she says, are taught that the ethics of productivity, activity and busy-ness are important at all stages of life. Thus we struggle desperately to replace work with some activity that's considered "productive."

This struggle can create stress for individuals — because without "productive" work, your self-esteem may be the first thing to suffer — and help create underlying stress in marriages.

"North Americans are often poorly prepared for leisure," Eisen says.

"We should be encouraging young people, people of all ages to cultivate hobbies or a broad range of interests beyond the work sphere early in life.

"The corollary to this is that it encourages people's openness to learning and discovery."

Part of the reason for our reluctance to understand and appreciate leisure lies with our lack of it prior to retirement.

In other countries, workers are routinely granted much more vacation time than workers receive in the United States, Eisen points out.

An entry level worker in the U.S. receives, on average, 11 paid vacation days annually. It takes a U.S. worker 30 years to match the level of paid holiday time routinely provided workers in Europe, for example, where a French automotive worker, at entry level, receives five weeks of annual paid vacation plus national holidays, or a German worker gets six weeks plus 10 paid holidays off each year.

"We need to learn to appreciate and expect leisure time," Eisen says.

"I've always wondered why so many North Americans are complacent about this when they are so activist in other areas of life."