

Features

Every working woman needs a wife, professor says

United Press International
WASHINGTON — "Every working woman needs a wife," says a University of Maryland professor. "Imagine going home from work and having a drink ready or dinner ready. Or, when you go on a business trip, someone to pack

for you, and even better, someone to unpack and do your laundry when you get home." Because executives work under constant, intolerable stress, large corporations spend millions to help managers cope with the rigors of running the company.

But it's not the executives who need help, says Prof. Dale Masi of the University of Maryland School of Social Work. It's secretaries.

A secretary — generally a woman — pounding a typewriter and scribbling in a steno pad is subjected to much more pressure than her higher-salaried boss, Masi says. The boss often is responsible for her stress. He uses her as an escape valve for his tension.

Secretarial pressure often leads to mental and physical damage, alcohol and drug abuse, Masi said, and it can be deadly.

A federal government ranking of the 10 most stressful occupations rates secretary second, below coal miners and construction workers. Officer managers and foremen are ranked lower. The ranking is based on death rates and admissions records at hospitals and mental health facilities.

Masi, who works for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the University of Maryland, said secretarial strain is manifested by a greater risk of heart disease, abuse of legal drugs, alcoholism and mental illness, most often in the form of

depression.

She said the rate of coronary disease among clerical workers is double that of all other working women.

Stress among women office workers is more acute than other "pink collar," low-paying occupations — cashiers, nurses and waitresses — for several reasons, Masi said.

One is the disparity between the amount of responsibility and autonomy. Secretaries very often have more knowledge of the nuts-and-bolts operation of the firm than their bosses, but seldom have the authority to make or implement decisions.

Other factors are lack of opportunity for advancement and boredom, particularly for secretaries with college degrees who entered the field because they couldn't decide on a career.

"Secretaries are underemployed, especially college grads who didn't know what to major in. You work for years as a secretary and all of a sudden, you wonder if there isn't something more, something better. You ask, 'Where do I go from here?'" Masi said.

Feeling that their contribution to the firm is minimal, or completely ignored, enhances low self esteem and heightens frustration. Another factor among all women workers, but particularly secretaries, is lack of sleep caused by trying to excel at two jobs — one at home and one outside.

"The biggest social change of the past decade is the number of women working outside the home," Masi said. "One reason is because they want to, but in a

great number of cases, the economy pushed them into the work force to keep their families going."

Trying to stretch a meager pay check also exacerbates stress, particularly for divorced women and single parents, whom Dr. Masi called the country's fastest growing poverty group. They bear the double burden of child care and job.

Married women don't fare much better, Masi said, because they are saddled with housefrau responsibilities after they cover their typewriters for the day. Working women often feel guilty if they can't handle both jobs properly, she added.

She said the subgroup most vulnerable to coronary disease is the secretary married to a blue collar worker with at least three children. Their husbands suffer from the "that's women's work" syndrome and offer little help with household chores or caring for children.

On-the-job stress has boosted the number of secretaries abusing legal drugs and alcohol. Masi said women workers are "almost matching" men addicted to alcohol, with one woman alcoholic for every four males.

Conducting occupational research in Boston a few years ago, she found a shocking number of working women who took prescription tranquilizers would save the pills for a Friday "jolt."

Masi said companies can save money by implementing prog-

rams to alleviate secretarial stress just won't go away.

"People with personal problems don't operate at peak efficiency. Lateness, absence, poor decision making, a lot of lost time — if companies do something to get people functioning, it's very cost-effective."

She said women employees should present their needs and concerns to their male supervisors and put their heads together to solve these problems. "These men are fathers of daughters who might become secretaries one day."

Companies should institute employment counseling for secretaries who want to move up the career ladder, she said. It should also involve clerical workers in decision making, holding shops on how to handle stress, up in-house day care and offering time to let secretaries schedule their work days around their needs.

The problem of secretarial stress just won't go away until going to get worse before it gets better, Masi said.

"There is no turning back for people who say women should work have to realize that we are working for economic reasons and because they want to."

"Unfortunately, there is a cultural resistance to women. But it's a very sad thing. There simply is no alternative for women not working outside the home."

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Father says courts have pro-mother bias

United Press International
EVANSTON, Ill. — Jeff Atkinson's story is not unique. He is a divorced man with two young daughters.

The girls are in his ex-wife's custody. Atkinson is out to change that with a suit charging sex discrimination. It will be argued before the Illinois Supreme Court in mid May.

"The suit is just a very natural outgrowth," said the 32-year-old attorney.

"I had been raising those kids for eight years. I still feel I can do a better job."

"The ability to parent is not unique to women. My former wife got custody because she is a woman and the kids are girls. If the kids were boys, things might be different. Courts have got to look at the individual facts and not just arbitrarily award custody to women."

Atkinson was divorced from Janet, 31, in 1977. Since then, Janet, who also is an attorney, has remarried. Atkinson has not.

The father said he got the short end when Judge Albert Porter awarded custody to his ex-wife.

"The visitation rights are not very good," Atkinson said. "I'm only allowed every other weekend and Tuesday nights. But I've found ways to get around that. I teach at the girls' school part-time and get to see them then."

Atkinson said his daughters, Abby, 11, and Tara, 9, have told him they would prefer living with him. That, he said, creates "a lot of bitterness" between him and his former wife.

"I am not trying to take away Janet's motherhood," he said.

Janet, now Mrs. Hoffman, says, "I'm just a mother who has watched her children suffer. The kids have become a battleground."

The tension has affected the children.

"I am trying to be as natural as loving as I can be," Atkinson said. "They feel caught in the middle. Atkinson denied he is trying to use his children to get back at his mother."

"Our marriage is dead over. I want my personal life on," he said. "I can give the kids a better sense of themselves as people. I tune into them more."

He said it has been 30 years since the state Supreme Court agreed to hear a child custody case where sex discrimination was an issue.

"Times have changed," Atkinson said. "Courts should not make decisions based on sex."

Attorney Herbert Gleiberman, a divorce lawyer and author of a book on custody, said he has fought for custody of their children in Illinois, the state court's equal rights clause disallows custody decisions based on sex, he said.

"If you have two working parents, the mother doesn't have any more time to devote to the child," Gleiberman said.

"If when she comes home she does things of a personal nature and the father on the other side comes home and starts helping with the kids with their homework, the court could conclude he's the better parent because he's spending quality time. That's what happens in many, many cases."

Atkinson is less than optimistic about his chances.

"The law is neutral but just hearts are not," Atkinson said. "It's their gut instinct that mothers should raise children."

Even if he doesn't win custody, Atkinson said he hopes the case will result in better visitation rights and perhaps make it easier for other fathers to win custody of their children.

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