

Housework or Your Life: Why hiring help is good for your relationships and your health

By Melanie Bowden

There's a dirty little secret in many American homes—couples fight about the housework. It's the #1 issue my husband and I argue about. We argue over who is doing more, who should be doing which chores, and why my standards are unrealistic.

There is always too much to take care of and, with two kids, neither one of us has the energy to keep on top of it all. When the laundry, dirty dishes, and dust pile up, I feel stressed and resentful and the fighting begins.

Author Kathy Fitzgerald Sherman deals with the issue of managing a household and keeping your marriage intact in her book *A Housekeeper Is Cheaper Than a Divorce: Why You Can Afford to Hire Help and How To Get It*.

Her book clearly shows that most couples are trying to split three full-time jobs (his, hers, and managing the house) between two people. There just aren't enough hours in the day. The current arrangement is leading to a nation of tired, angry couples with no time to relax with each other or their children.

Why the house is overwhelming

Sherman's research found that the first child triggers an increase of 21 hours of chores per week, not including childrearing, while each additional child adds 6 hours of chores. The average American mother, whether she works out of the home or not, spends 35 hours a week doing housework. When you think about the time spent on cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, the yardwork, and laundry, it's clear that managing a home is no small feat.

Thirty-five hours a week is a lot of time even when things are running normally. Add in any extra time pressures (a spouse who works two jobs, homeschooling, home improvement projects, health problems, or volunteer work) and keeping up the house quickly becomes a source of stress and conflict.

Louise Mark, who homeschools her two children and whose husband works double shifts, says, "I am resentful when my husband gets to have some relaxation time, but know he really needs it too. I rarely get more than an afternoon or morning off by myself."

Times have changed—a lot

While many of our parents got along without household help (although I bet they wouldn't have minded some) the amount of hands-on parenting time at home has increased dramatically in the past 20 years. It's no longer safe in most areas to let children play in the front yard or out in the neighborhood unsupervised. Parents also spend more time driving kids to activities, again because it's not safe to let the children walk or ride their bikes.

All of these factors lead to children being underfoot at home more and cutting into the time parents have to take care of chores.

Susan Riley, a marriage and family therapist, estimates that household chores are a problem for 75% of the couples she counsels. According to Riley, "Structured events such as arranged play dates and organized sports eat up a lot of time. People haven't changed their idea of what they should be doing with what's real."

Differences between the sexes

Why can't women just get organized and split the chores up with their husbands? As Sherman puts it, "as though men are eager to add to their already overloaded schedules by performing chores they don't like, don't know how to do, and may not even care about!" One University of Chicago study even found that as the number of hours men spend on housework increases, their feelings of being appreciated decreases.

Sherman states that men and women are biologically different in how they see housecleaning. She says, "men have tunnel vision compared to women's wide field of vision." This is why men can relax in the middle of a mess, while women can't find peace until they feel their environment is in order.

This has happened to me numerous times; I nag my family to finish their chores so we can play, yet my husband doesn't understand why we can't just play around the mess.

Stigmas about hiring household help

Many people think they can't afford help with the house. Sherman says that the belief that household help is only for the wealthy is a "stubborn myth" and that we need to view hiring help as a "time-management tool for busy people."

There are also costs involved to not hiring help. Health problems like stress, lack of time for exercise, and sleep deprivation; lost income where the hours spent cleaning could have been used to pursue career goals; and the strain on your marriage that could lead to money spent on counseling or even a divorce.

Riley adds that it's a matter of priorities and that obtaining help is not a sign of weakness, but self-care. "If you value time with family over time cleaning then it makes sense to get support. People still believe they can do it all, but it's OK to ask for help. It's not that expensive and even my clients who have help only once a month feel relief."

Household help can change your life

Sherman, who employs a 20-hour a week housekeeper, found that paying someone else to do the tasks she didn't want to do freed her to do what really matters. Hiring a housekeeper allowed her to focus on what she's good at, and closely match her daily routine to her values, interests, and priorities.

Even if you think you can't squeeze another cent out of your budget, there are ways to creatively finance getting the household help you need.

Sherman suggests you look for opportunities to either increase income or decrease expenses. Using the first option, Sherman took over some of her husband's chauffeuring duties with their children so that he could bill more time in his work as a consultant. To decrease expenses, look for places where you can cut back on discretionary spending, such as cable TV, pricey vacations, clothes, or high-tech toys.

It's worth it to allot room in your budget to lessen your housework burden. Time is precious. Wouldn't you rather spend it doing something other than fighting over whose turn it is to clean the toilet? I know I would.

Writer mom Melanie Bowden lives in California. She currently has twice a month cleaning help and dreams of hiring someone to organize her garage.

Reprinted by permission of Herman Miller, Inc., and Jugglezine.