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Keep venting about job woes to family under control

By Maggie Jackson, Globe Correspondent, 9/11/2005



GLOBE PHOTO/SARAH BREZINSKY
Beth Cohen (middle) shares dinner with her daughter Paula Cooper and husband Topher Cooper.

When she gets home, Beth Cohen likes to share her war stories — the politics, crises and characters that make her breathe fire or purr each day. But she knows when she's crossed the line and done too much venting when her 13-year-old son rolls his eyes and leaves the room, and her long-supportive husband gets restless.

"When I'm frustrated, they do get tired of it," says Cohen, director of operations for Broadleaf, a data protection company in Lexington. Adds her husband, software engineer Topher Cooper, "At times I don't have patience with the venting. I'm human."

We often bring home more than a paycheck and a laptop from the office. We cross the front door loaded with emotional baggage that we expect and need to share with spouses and other family members who are often our most understanding supporters and trusted advisers. That's natural. Done wrong, however, this sharing can become toxic to both our own search for balance and our relationships.

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"It's sort of the difference between sharing it with your partner and hosing it on your partner," says Laurie Rhoades, a psychotherapist in Arlington who specializes in couples' relationships. "If it's just a constant venting of 'Here are all the lousy things that happened to me today,' that's going to be old and boring."

In a technology-driven, 24/7 world, work and life run freely into one another. Yet research shows that the stresses of work intrude on our home lives more than personal difficulties interfere with our jobs. "As a culture, we arrange our families around our jobs, rather than the other way around," says Sue Mennino, an assistant sociology professor at Loyola University in New Orleans who recently published a study on "work-life spillover."

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- Yes! I need to get it out
- No, I spare them
- I talk, but don't rant
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When job stresses intrude at home, we feel that we don't have time or energy for ourselves or for family and our mood blackens, according the Families and Work Institute.

Workers suffer less negative spillover at home when they have a supportive culture, access to flexible work and understanding managers, the institute reports. In her study, Mennino found that workplace culture mattered most in alleviating negative job-to-home spillover.

But when we are stuck — as we so often are — with bad bosses, inflexible schedules, low morale and troubles, we bring our frustrations home in spades. After a reorganization, Brooke Selby was so unhappy at her old job planning trade shows that she stopped exercising and then cooking, her favorite hobby. She complained so much that her marriage grew tense. "He didn't have any answers and I didn't have any answers," Selby recalls. "It made me feel really down."

In January, Selby and a partner started a Cambridge event planning firm, a move that improved her work and home lives. She listens more to her husband's job frustrations and they trade suggestions. They've learned the first rule of healthy venting: keep it constructive and take turns.

A second rule is limiting the duration of the venting. "If this is taking up most of your time as a couple, that is not a good thing," says Marjorie Siegel, a clinical social worker in Brookline. She suggests time limits and asking partners first if they're willing to listen. Also, try sparing the details, says Rick Brenner, head of Boston's Chaco Canyon Consulting, which focuses on interpersonal relations. "You might walk in and say, 'I need a hug,'" says Brenner.

Some people are chronic complainers, and others will only be cured of relentless venting by a job change. But most of us can navigate the tricky transition back home with mutual sensitivity. Topher Cooper gets impatient when his wife obsesses over an issue, but he mostly sees her shoptalk as healthy. Now consulting and job-hunting after a downsizing, Cooper wishes he'd been more open about his office life. "I tend to keep my nose in my work," he says. "Maybe if I was talking and sharing it more with her, I might not have gotten caught by surprise."

Maggie Jackson's Balancing Acts column appears every other week. She can be reached at maggie.jackson@att.net.

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