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ALPHA WIVES

## Is Being an Alpha Wife Ruining Your Life?

The high-powered job, the dream house, the toned body--more women than ever are overachieving. But there's a downside to all that perfection: Many do-it-all divas are too stressed to enjoy their success. Here's how to make sure being a control-obsessed superstar doesn't compromise your happiness

Nicole Blades

You've seen her at the grocery store, gracefully navigating the aisles in some fabulous four-inch heels as she closes a deal on her BlackBerry Pearl. And there she is again, dropping the kids off at school, buff biceps flexing under a jumbo tray of homemade cupcakes while she updates her hubby on the kitchen reno. She's an Alpha Wife: a powerful, perfectly put-together multitasking machine who thrives on being at the top of her game at every moment.

Sound familiar? Maybe even like you? That's not surprising: The number of alpha wives is on the rise. A 2008 Pew Research Center survey on decision making in the typical American household found that when it comes to having the final say on everything from how to spend the weekend to which major purchases to make, women call the shots in 43 percent of couples. In contrast, men were the decision makers in 26 percent of couples, while 31 percent said they share control. The imbalance of power and responsibility may be even more pronounced among the 25 percent of women who, according to a 2007 report by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, out-earn their partners (up from 17.8 percent 10 years ago).

"These stats don't surprise me at all," says Scott Haltzman, M.D., a clinical assistant professor at Brown University and author of *Secrets of Happily Married Women*. "The rates of women entering and graduating from college exceed those of men. The women I see in my office are often the primary breadwinners, and surely these numbers will rise as women's education levels continue to surpass men's."

Security. Control. Decision-making power. Who wouldn't want those things in a relationship? But they can come at a high price. For many women, heading up the household and leading the charge at the office leaves them overwhelmed, overextended, and completely spent emotionally and physically. A 2004 study at York University in Toronto found that high achievers of both sexes were more prone to emotional, physical, and relationship problems.

Women with this nonstop make-it-happen drive "can experience everything from general uneasiness, irritability, and fatigue to sleep problems, persistent aches and pains, and compromised immune systems," says Debbie Mandel, a stress-management expert and the author of *Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7 Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life*. In fact, she says, studies have shown that chronic stress can shorten a person's life by up to 25 percent.

"We're in serious jeopardy of not only burnout and depression but also just missing out on life," says Liz Funk, the author of *Supergirls Speak Out: Inside the Secret Crisis of Overachieving Girls*. But too many women snowed under by responsibilities wait until they suffer breakdowns or panic attacks before changing their habits, Funk says. The answer for overachieving is to apply some of their "must-do-everything" energy to finding balance. Here's how.

### Lose Your Fear Of Letting Go

From day one, Jasmine\*, 38, had been the shot caller in her nine-year relationship with Michael, a 33-year-old quality analyst at a telecommunications company. But things really kicked into high gear six years ago, when the two started planning their wedding. Jasmine hammered a detailed plan for the big day, the tropical honeymoon, and the even move into their new condo. It's not as if she set out to grab the wheel, she says. "From the beginning of our marriage, I just became the one making the decisions and ensuring that our home life ran smoothly," says Jasmine, a legal mediator in Toronto. She had grown up watching both her mother and grandmother run their households, and despite having a demanding career, she felt comfortable doing the same. Besides, she saw perks to being the boss: "The fact that I would take charge provided stability in our relationship, because the roles were defined and there was little room for ambiguity." Splitting errands and chores randomly, she says, seemed a lot more complicated.

The breaking point came when Jasmine's ailing father came to live with them. The added responsibility was too much. "I started getting headaches and stomachaches--which is usually my sign of overload--and realized I couldn't do it all," she says. Jasmine eventually did ask Michael for help juggling the new duties at home, but, she says, she often felt compelled to "coach" him (i.e., take control). "It's just really difficult to transition out of this role," she says.

Asking someone like Jasmine to "just let go" is like telling George Clooney to ease up on the charisma--it's what he does, and it works for him. Jennifer, a 30-year-old magazine editor in New York City, feels that if she doesn't take charge, things won't get done. "I think he relies on me to do most everything because he knows I will keep our lives in good order," she says of her husband of three years, a 32-year-old licensing analyst.

Many overwhelmed alpha wives confess fearing that things will fall through the cracks if they don't attend to them personally, says Alex Pattakos, Ph.D., founder of the Center for Meaning in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the author of *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*. They wonder, "What will happen if I stop being so meticulous? Will I look incompetent at work? Will my family and home life suffer?" But, Pattakos says, "the question they should really be asking themselves is 'What will happen if I don't stop?'"

"You might find out that someone else steps up to the plate and gets things done anyway," he says. Or maybe you'll discover that some issues aren't as pressing as you might have thought they were. Pattakos suggests switching your attention from the "If I don't, it won't" rationale to understanding why you're still doing things in a particular way. Will taking care of the laundry on this specific day and in this specific way really enrich your life? (Yeah, we didn't think so.)

### Tap Into Man Power

This "move over, I'll do it" attitude also sends a counterproductive message to husbands. It says pretty clearly that you doubt he'll follow through--on the laundry, on dinner, on making the appointment with the accountant. And if that's the case, why should he bother trying at all? "Women have developed standards in terms of child and home care from their own mothers, their female peers, 'supermom' blogs, and even TV commercials," Haltzman says. "But it doesn't make sense to hold a man, who has been influenced by a different set of factors, to those same standards. You've got to let him do things *his way*." It's not about lowering your standards, Haltzman says, but modifying them. "It means putting aside a set of policies that may have worked for you as an individual but that aren't practicable as a member of a team." After all, there's more than one right way to wash a dish.

"Your husband can be the single greatest asset in achieving a balanced household if you're willing to trust his judgment," Haltzman says. He suggests sitting down as a couple to talk about how your standards differ and, more important, where you can be flexible. "Maybe your kid doesn't get a shower after soccer this one evening," he says. "Accept that nothing bad will come of it. It probably won't keep him from getting into Harvard." Once you accept that your husband's MO is often perfectly fine, you can stop stressing and let it be.

In Cynthia "Cy" Wakeman's case, being an alpha wife isn't hurting her health, but it is hurting her marriage. As an in-demand human-resources consultant and speaker, Wakeman spends a lot of time on the road, with 12-hour days and overnight trips away from her Sioux City, Iowa, home twice a week. "It's not about power struggles between us or the fact that I make more

money than he does," she says of her husband of 18 years. "The issue is my not having anything--emotionally or physically--left for him when I finally do get home."

It's easy to think that unlike your boss or your kids, your man can handle being pushed aside when you're out of energy, she says. Or that your hubby is an adult--busy in his own right--and might not require your attention. "But he needs to know that you're still a team," Haltzman says, "and that you have affection for him." That doesn't mean dragging out the feather boa and the kinky handcuffs after a long, loaded day. Getting close might be as simple as sharing a couple of glasses of pinot noir in the evening while sprawled out on the living room couch. "It's time well spent," Haltzman says. "Because knowing you have a solid foundation in your relationship will help you feel more grounded at home and at work."

Frequent travelers like Wakeman may need to get creative about making these connections. Set an alarm on your iPhone to remind you to text your husband a quick miss-you missive. "But," Haltzman says, "avoid using these interactions to check on the kids or send him more things to add to the to-do lists." The payoff will be a man who feels loved and appreciated--and more motivated to make you happy.

#### Throw Up A White Flag

You might be the golden girl at work and run your house like a five-star hotel, but it's unlikely that you can do it all and still have time to enjoy your life. As Wakeman sees it, it's important to "surrender early and ask for help from your husband and friends." You simply can't be all things to all people at all times.

Put aside what others say makes a functional family, says social psychologist Susan Newman, Ph.D., the author of *The Book of No: 250 Ways to Say It--and Mean It*. "Adopt whatever setup works for your family without being concerned about outside opinions." Start by distributing everyday responsibilities fairly. You're not exempt from chores just because you're bringing home most of the money, she says. Conversely, he should help handle the finances even if he's not the breadwinner by keeping track of investments or organizing the bills.

Newman strongly advocates viewing income as "ours" rather than yours or his, regardless of the source, as a way to curb squabbles or resentment. She suggests dividing duties from the get-go: who writes the checks, who pays for date nights, whose paycheck handles which expense. And all jokes aside: No guy wants to feel like a kept man. "Consult with your partner on all budget issues and major buying decisions," Newman says. "Consider using a joint credit card to make big purchases, so you won't feel as if you're paying for everything."

Getting help also includes scheduling regular R&R. Many alpha wives have adopted a warrior persona--it's what has made them successful at work--and "sometimes it's difficult to turn that off at home," Haltzman says. "You need to get your emotional and physical strength back before starting your 'second shift' at home as mom and wife." Besides obvious stress busters like massages and yoga classes, little weekly rituals like watching a TiVo'd episode of *Project Runway* with a friend or taking an extra-long shower can do the trick. "Scheduling these time-outs is often the only way to ensure that they happen," Haltzman says. So get out your agenda and start writing them in, because there's no point in being at the top of your game if you're also at the end of your rope.

*\*Some names have been changed.*

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