

# can an extension wife find happiness?

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Sandra Draheim

When I was asked to write about how I "manage" as the wife of an Extension horticultural agent, the only thought that came to mind was, "Why me?" I don't have 25 years of experience, 8 children, a demanding career of my own, or any other distinctions qualifying me as an expert. Nor do I have the wit of Erma Bombeck. But then I realized that the topic wasn't to give advice on how you can cope, rather to tell how I do.

Here are some of the ideas we've come up with at our home.

The first that comes to mind is management of time—there's never enough of it. While theoretically my husband works a 40-hour week, in reality it's more like 45 or 50. This means lots of lonely evenings, family outings that are instead mother/son excursions, uneaten lunches, and cold dinners when meetings drag on longer than expected.

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I've learned to "wait until I see the whites of his eyes" before I start the bacon/lettuce/tomato sandwiches, or I'll most certainly have to eat two. After many frustrating evenings, when our son has had to sit for hours at a meeting with me, or I've had to pay a babysitter so that I could give my time to a worthy cause, we finally recognized that we need to constantly compare calendars.

Each of us keeps notes on what the other's doing. This way we're sure to have some evenings when we can be together as a family. I have the opportunity to pursue some of my

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interests rather than having to always adjust my schedule to the Extension Service's. And, we have the alternative of hiring someone to care for our son if we agree that both of our commitments are of such importance that we feel it's justified.

Another aspect of the problem is that my husband is so involved in managing his work that he doesn't have time to manage the household. I'm sure that many families have hit on the same solution we have—I handle most of the home management responsibilities, consulting with him on major decisions when I feel that it's necessary. That's not to say that I can't count on him to help when I need it.

When you work 8 to 10 hours a day dealing with people and plants, it only makes sense that you need to spend some part of your leisure time away from both. This means that very often our lawn is the last one in the neighborhood to be fertilized and that my house plants have to suffer longer before the "plant doctor" gets around to treating them. How do I cope? Simple acceptance is the only solution I've discovered. And, out of respect for his need to get away from it all, I try not to overload our social schedule with "peopled" events.

Considering social engagements, we come to another area in which job influences are apparent. I find that I not only share my husband with his work, but also with the 2.7 million people who occupy Wayne County, Michigan. When we're out in a group, I often find the conversation centering around trees, lawns, shrubs, and everyone else's house plants, when I'd rather talk about something—almost anything—else.

It means that people constantly ask me to "ask Jerry" about some problem they're having with their lawn or garden. The wanting-to-be-of-service part of my personality tempts me to call him immediately at the office or ferret out the answer myself in one of the many books around the house—the motivation being to show them how really efficiently I can handle their request. I've learned—most of the time—to stifle these impulses and suggest they call him at the office during regular hours.

Putting these thoughts on paper makes me realize that, when you get right down to it, the most important thing isn't the method of managing—that's a very individual thing and varies with the individual. Or to put it another way, the way *we* manage may not interest *you* at all. Rather it seems that the critical area is in defining and discussing the problems—and in some cases recognizing that there are problems involved in balancing the job and home life of an Extension agent.

Almost daily, women read about the importance of a positive self-image, an identity of one's own. Because Extension agents play important roles in their communities, they're generally highly visible individuals—columns in the local newspaper; appearances on radio and television, frequent talks to all kinds of organizations.

It's not too difficult to imagine that the agent's wife may feel left out, unimportant. She needs to be encouraged to develop her own interests, her own areas of expertise where she can be recognized as the unique, worthy person she is. I've found that volunteer work fills this need for me. For others, the solution may lie in pursuing their education or in a career outside the home. In any case, I think it's important to realize that everyone needs to feel that he/she is a contributing member of society—and Extension wives are no exception.

Does the way my husband manages his job affect the way we manage our home life? Of course! But, also, the way I manage our home life influences how well he manages his job!