

## Dual career couple challenges

**Guest: Jennifer Petriglieri**

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**Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]**

Welcome to this interview, I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today, I'm very happy to be talking to Jennifer Petriglieri, an associate professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD Business School and the author of *Couples That Work* a book about what it takes to thrive in a relationship with two careers over a lifetime.

Her recent TED Talk explores how dual career couples can make tough choices, and her *Free Survival* series has helped thousands of couples navigate forced homeworking brought about by the COVID pandemic.

In today's interview, we'll be talking about the challenges presented when a dual career couple encounters caretaking responsibilities, whether that be from parenthood, illness or the unexpected needs of a loved one. There are lots of traps in this kind of negotiation, and I really wish I'd had this book 12 years ago before I became a parent.

Jennifer, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

It's great to be with you, Meagen. Thanks for having me.

**Meagen Gibson**

So as we begin, what are some of the most common things that dual career couples struggle with?

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

It's a great question, on the one hand, there's lots of them, right, there are lots of practical challenges, whether it comes from people with caretaking, interactions between our careers, whose job takes priority.

But when you boil it down, a lot of these really link to fundamental questions of power. How do we decide who gets to choose, whose career takes priority, how do we support each other?

So we can think of it as a layer of challenges that we can see and a real underlayer of causes that are the things we need to work with.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. So issues vs the causes of those issues.

And then what are some of the traps that people get into when they're trying to negotiate these issues?

**Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:01:57]**

The biggest trap is really to focus on what we can see. So focus on the practicalities. And we've all done this, right. It's the pick up and drop off of childcare schedule. It's the finances, whose job pays the most and therefore who chooses? It's the scheduling of calendars. It's the scheduling of travel things.

Now of course these things are important and that pinpoints, but it turns out they're not really the issue. There the sort of symptoms, if you like, rather than the cause.

And very often when couples are struggling and wrestling with these things, what they're really wrestling with are these slightly deeper questions of, you know, what is a good life for us? How do we balance the power between us? How do we make choices in a way that makes a meaningful life for us?

**Meagen Gibson**

Hmm, so and I'm sure I've made all of the things, all of the mistakes that you talk about in your writing, not necessarily mistakes, but all of the very natural processes that people go through and the things that most couples encounter. I felt like I was reading a journal of the last 15 years of my life between my partner and I. And those practicalities are obviously the symptoms, like you said, and the things that get in the way.

And in fact, 12 hours ago, I had a practicality argument with my partner, to just be completely honest. And as I was having it, I was thinking about, all right, so what are we really trying to say here? I remember saying, like, when this kind of thing, when this kind of miscommunication happens, I feel disrespected or I feel like my work isn't valued or, you know, like those types of things. And I imagine that that's what you encountered in your work and in your research, that these are the things that couples are really struggling with.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Absolutely. And of course, it's not the day-to-day things, it's the day-to-day things and it's also really big decisions.

So take a decision which many couples face at the moment with the kind of fluidity of the job market, which is should we relocate or not? One member of the couple gets a great job offer in a city across the country. What do we do? Do we both move? Do we try some kind of commuting thing?

And very often we try to be really rational and think, OK, well, if we can earn the same amount of money roughly, then we should go for it or a little bit more it's going to be better for the family.

And on the surface level, that sounds rational, right? But so many couples make a decision based on that rational criteria. And then, lo and behold, 6, 12 months later they're feeling resentful. The arguments are popping up, they're feeling guilty.

Because, of course, it's not a decision based on money. It's a decision based on whose career takes priority. And it's also a decision on what's important in life? What about our community? What about being close to family? All of these other factors?

And I think in the rush of modern day life, it's so easy and it's totally understandable why we rely on what looks like obvious decision criteria, but they get us into trouble later on.

So it's not just about taking the trash out at night. It's also about these much more consequential decisions, which, if we get wrong for a couple, can have really big consequences for our lives and the lives of our families.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:05:12]**

And as you were talking, I was thinking of many, many things, but it almost seems like those practical choices that kind of inundate our everyday lives, that's how we address these big choices as just practicalities, right?

Like, well, it's simple. You make more money or well, it's simple, this is a huge promotion. So, if you're free to pick up the kids, then you get them, I'm not. If you got a promotion, then you take it and I don't. And it's much more of a philosophical conversation about what we want as a family, what we want as a couple, what we want for our careers. And it's not quite as simple as those practicalities is it?

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah, I think obviously there's the off day where the practicalities need to take over. You know, there's an emergency, there's a crisis, it's all hands on deck.

But I think what happens over the long term is if we keep making decisions like that, we store up these problems for later. And you say it's a philosophical conversation, and I suppose in a way it is. But it's not a kind of deep conversation that requires 5 years of psychoanalysis or something like this.

It's really just sitting down. And I often think the most, if you look to do one thing in your couple, the most important thing would be just to sit down and think maybe about the next 5 years, OK, which is a good time scale because it's long enough that if you want to make a transition, that's the kind of reasonable time period.

You know, it's really hard to imagine 10 years out. So if you think of the next 5 years and sit down with your partner and almost take a paper and pen or whatever and write down, what are some of the things that are important to you in those 5 years?

I'm sure there'll be some career goals and they may even be some financial goals on there, that's fine, but I bet there are others.

There might be some couple goals. Are there some things we really want to do together? There might be some individual goals. You know, we want to take up this hobby or want to spend more time with my parents, maybe before it's too late before the end.

And simply having that conversation. And the great thing about that conversation is you don't need to agree. You just need to understand what's on each other's list.

What I find in my research is simply having that understanding, and all it takes is 20 minutes, half an hour, a big mug of tea or a glass of wine or beer and undivided attention can really make a difference to decision making because, of course, that is the list that your decisions should be based on. It's not just based on one of them. It's not just based on the everyday practicality. And when we have that slightly more holistic picture in mind, that's the kind of foundation, I think, a lot of things become a lot easier.

Now of course, there's many other conversations you need to have but if you're just going to have one, that one can save you a lot of trouble in making wrong turns.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I found that a lot of couples, one of the partners does the primary default parenting work. So, if there's a sick child or if there's an emergency they're the one that kind of picks up the slack, and I've

found that there's a correlation between that parent and or that spouse in this situation, even if they're not a parent, that person is the one who has the most unspoken needs because they understand the logistics of how impossible some of those might be or how impractical some of those might sound.

And so if I hear you correctly, it's like you need to speak all of those dreams or all of those needs or all of those wants, even if you know that they're logistically or practically not possible right now, that's not what matters. What matters is that you put them out into the open and speak them.

**Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:08:49]**

Absolutely. And what I find in my research is that the couples who are most successful, i.e., happiest in their relationship and happiest in their careers, it's not about ticking off that list. It's about feeling that you had a shot at it or that list was understood, right.

And that's what makes the difference. I mean, no one achieves everything they want to achieve in life. That just doesn't happen. But knowing that I've been understood and respected and I've had some wiggle room and I also think it brings a piece of reality to the picture. When we put those lists down, it's very evident we can't have everything at once.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right. Right.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

We can keep it in mind and think, OK, for the last 18 months, we've really been focusing on these couple of aspects. We've got to broaden out and balance or regret is going to come into the relationship. So it's really about being more mindful, I guess, in our decision making and our thinking through process.

Because just so often I talk to couples and they say, you know, I just woke up one morning and thought, how did we get here? We get on a train and we carry on. And of course, life gets busy. It does for all of us and we're growing our careers. Maybe we have children. Maybe you have eldercare, we have things in our community and suddenly false ideas pass and we've missed a chunk of our life when we could have ticked off or had a go at these other things that are important to us.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, and I know that you mentioned in the book that sometimes we're on these career paths and we're so grateful for them and we have this sense of like, well, who am I to question all of the good fortune or all of the opportunities that I've earned or been given? Who am I to question that I could want something different than this?

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Absolutely. And that is a very classic thing that happens around mid career, midlife stage. I mean, we talk about the midlife crisis, but it's actually a really important developmental step psychologically, which is this ability to step back and just take a look at our life and think, is this really what I want? It might be all good, but is it really what I want?

And I think there's a natural tendency when we get to that mid-career stage to do that questioning. And that can be really stressful for couples, because if I'm starting to question, I'm not sure about the structure of our lives, I'm not sure about my career. It's really easy for you to interpret that as is this my fault? Is this a problem with the relationship?

And of course, what we see when we look at the divorce statistics is they're not linear. There's a real peak around this time, which is when we're doing this re-questioning.

And so this re-questioning, of course, then starts to go beyond this list of things we want, but really into the question of how do we support each other in a couple?

And I think especially in the U.S. and the U.K., where I'm from, and the Western world, we've come to have this view of a good couple, a supportive couple, of one where there's lots of empathy and lots of cheerleading. You're great. It will be fine. Everything's going to be good. The kind of cuddle aspect of the relationship.

And don't get me wrong, this is wonderful. And if my husband's watching, I like it. But it's not actually that helpful for us when we're at a time of transition. And when we're at a time of transition what we need a little bit more is that loving push or that loving kick to say, OK, I hear you're unhappy, what are you going to do? How are we going to explore that? How are we going to shift the dynamic?

But that can be really threatening, right? Because if we're in a couple and you shift and you change, that has consequences for me. So what we often see is that partners are actually quite invested in the other person staying the same because that enables them to keep their roles. And that's why this mid career, and what I talk about in the book is the transition point here can be really difficult to negotiate because it's not a case, you know, if you read the career books, they'll tell you how to make a career pivot and how to make the shift without thinking that actually that has huge knock on effects for your partner and for your family.

And so in the book I really explore, OK, the holistic thing. It's not just about making a career pivot and making a career rethink, but how do you then negotiate the knock on effects onto your couple, onto your family, onto the wider system?

And unless you do that, your career transition is not going to work, no matter how much time you've put into networking and to finding a new job and all this sort of stuff, you're not going to be supported through it.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:13:25]**

Yes, I can tell you, I've lived this, and one of the things that I was thinking as you were speaking about the effects on the partner, I know that I experienced a real, even though it was my idea, I had kind of given my partner that push to to make a change. It triggered a lot of safety issues with me to have him have an instability, even though it wasn't, even though it was very planned and executed. It created so much safety scarcity for me, even though everything was fine.

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Of course and you're totally normal Meagen, don't worry.

One of the huge benefits of being in a working couple is you can afford to make transitions, you know. And this is great, especially in a world where careers are much more mobile and much more disjointed than they were before. You know, when your partner earns an income, you've got that much wiggle room to make a transition. But that doesn't necessarily make it easy.

And I think sometimes couples, again, can default to the finance, well we're going to save a bit and we're going to rely on your salary for these few months and then we will be OK. Which practically may be true, but that's ignoring the psychological issues, as you found, the sort of like, oh, my goodness, I'm suddenly the breadwinner. And what if I lose my job and the pressure that's going to happen here?

Now, that's not to say you should never transition. It's great to make transitions.

## Meagen Gibson - [00:14:51]

Of course.

## Jennifer Petriglieri

Doing it without thinking those things through is going to make it much more challenging.

## Meagen Gibson

So now we've kind of talked about the water, now let's learn how to swim. So how can dual career couples decide whose career should take priority and when?

## Jennifer Petriglieri

Yeah, it's a great question. And in many ways it's the fundamental question for couples. And I looked at this and unpacked it a lot in the book.

If you think of career prioritization, we can think of three basic models.

The first is primary secondary. And we can think of this perhaps as the classic model where both partners have careers, but one takes priority all the time. That means they lead geographical moves. They dedicate that much time to work. Maybe their travel priorities come first. And the person in the secondary career still has a career, but they're taking a little bit more of a backseat. They'll pick up the slack at home and they'll manage that way. So that's the first way.

And certainly if your parents or your grandparents were in a working couple, they would almost certainly have had this model and it will probably be your father or grandfather in the primary position. Obviously, that's no longer the case. There's lots more gender fluidity but this is the classic model.

We can then think of a newer model, which is turn taking, which basically means we swap between the primary and secondary positions. So, if we were a couple, you might be primary for a while and I go secondary, and then we take turns and exchange.

This is a great model in some ways because when we look at ambition, what we see is it's really equaled out between the genders. And this is important not just for heterosexual couples, but also for the same sex couples as well, that traditionally the men have been more ambitious in the workplace and women in the home. But we've seen that equalize in both directions.

Now, we're very comfortable with saying women are just as ambitious as men at work, but it's also true that men are actually just as ambitious as women in the home now, which is very different.

And in fact, there's a very interesting recent study which shows the parents who spend most quality time with their children are actually gay fathers. We see this really clearly, that this ambitious level is on both. So this idea of turn taking, it's not about just taking a backseat on your career. It's also about taking a front seat on these things that are equally important to us.

And then the third level, the third kind of model is what I call double primary, which is we've agreed some constraints. So let's say we're not going to move outside the East Coast. Which takes some of those difficult decisions off the table. But within that, we're both going to go full pelt on our careers and we will equally parent or equally care give, or equally run the house, whatever that configuration is.

And one of the big questions I had, well, which one's best, you know? Is there a model that works the best? And when I started to analyze the data, and I found a surprising result, which was that on the surface, the double primary looked best. I thought, well, this is puzzling because it's hard work, right?

If you both have careers. But of course, there were couples who were successful, i.e. happy in their relationship, happy in their careers in the other two categorizations as well.

So I looked across all those successful couples and I saw they basically had one thing in common, and that was they very explicitly negotiated and agreed what their model was. And the reason there was more double primary was it is quite hard. You have to agree some boundaries so it forces you into those conversations.

The reason I really love this finding was that it doesn't matter what you pick, but it matters how you pick it. And I think what happens with many couples is we sort of fall into an agreement that's unspoken that we may not even agree on.

So I was talking to a couple the other day, who were fairly...

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:18:53]**

The conditions predicted or the conditions forced it to be a certain way instead of being an agreement.

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

A classic is we have children and we fall into a primary secondary career position.

But I was talking to a couple, a couple of months ago who very explicitly negotiated that they were turn taking. And they were super proud of this. However, they had not understood when they would swap terms.

So they'd set this 5 years and it was just as their children, they actually have twins, their twins were born, 5 years. So they got to the 5 years and she was like, OK, my turn. And he's like, no, no, no, no, no. It was 5 years from when we did that big geographical move, right?

And so, you know, it really showed the level of explicitness we need because it's so easy to make assumptions. And it's often not the bad will in couples that trips us up, it's that we just have different assumptions and they're unspoken. And I never realized that was 5 years for you. I'm assuming it's 5 years since I gave birth and you're assuming it's 5 years since we made that big move. And suddenly we're in this conflictual situation. So it's so easy not to do this.

But what I found across the board was couples who made this really explicit, they could thrive, whatever their model.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I love that.

And just as you said, it's not what we choose, it's how we choose it and the intentionality behind it.

So, if you're in the, either the first model or the second model taking turns, how can you best support your partner that's the one with the career currently?

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah, so well, it's important to note you've both got careers, right?

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

## **Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:20:38]**

One has just slightly more priority. And I think that's another mistake we make to not support the person with the secondary career enough, because it's not to say you're suddenly not got a career. It's just slightly less important.

And I think it really comes back to two things. First is understanding what does a good career look like for your partner? So very often we are honed in on this idea that it's about progression, it's about upward movement. But that's not the case for many of us anymore. And it's certainly not the case for many professions. It's not as simple as climbing that ladder. It might be developing a new skill, it might be a sideways movement, it might be, but it's your turn to be in the primary career position and you're going to use it to make that transition you wanted to make.

So it's really understanding. And it's also, and this sounds very radical, asking your partner what they need.

So what I found in my research, in fact, one of the saddest findings actually was that the couples who failed, almost never failed because they didn't support each other. They failed because they didn't understand what support the other person needed.

So what was happening if we're a couple is I'm working my butt off supporting you and feeling like you're not appreciating me and you're feeling like she's not giving me anything because I'm pushing in the wrong direction. And this happens all the time.

And what I find when I work with couples, is if they have this conversation, they actually need very little from each other. You know, two or three things. And when they find out it's like, if I'd have known that, how much easier my life would've been. Because we can essentially, it takes time and effort to be supportive, let's recognize that. And so, if we know the two or three things we can do to support our partner, that makes a difference, we're going to feel the gratitude, which is so important to make a relationship work, and we're not going to waste our effort. We can spend time for self-care for other things.

So just having that conversation and asking, what are those two or three things? So, let me give you an example. Some people really need a 10 minute download at the end of the day. They need to be able to come back, and not for an hour, but just need 10 minutes of undivided attention where you don't check your phone. I just need to be able to do it. And I'm good. How easy is that? 10 minutes a day is all you need to do. Job done.

Other people maybe want some gratitude, right. So very often when we're working really hard, we feel like we owe our partner something because they're picking up the slack at home. Very few couples turn it on its head and say, actually, I'm really grateful you're working hard right now, because I can see in the long term, this is going to have a beneficial effect on our family. You're going to transition to this job, which you're really passionate about, which is going to make home life happier. Maybe you're going to get this promotion, which is going to make a difference to our family finances. So that little bit of gratitude can be all the support they need. So very often people don't need huge things. It's actually quite little things that we need to feel supported.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Right. I often find, and I've seen this argument in my house and in all the couples that I know that have dual career couples, it's that you're both doing what you think needs to be done instead of asking the other person. And I had somebody tell me very wisely once that you need to operationally define support for you. What does support look and feel like of me and for me?

And I imagine that these are conversations that have to happen more than once. I mean, I know I fall into the trap that sometimes these conversations are difficult. They're challenging. They require time and space and effort and mindfulness, as you said. And because of that I feel like, OK, we have it, that



was hard. Now we're done and we're just going to walk away and be able to enact everything. And actually that's never happened. These conversations have to be revisited and reminded and those conversations are always in motion I bet.

### **Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:24:52]**

Yeah. But here's the counter-intuitive thing. If you have them more regularly they become a lot easier because it's just part of the fabric of your relationship, it's part of the habit.

I would also say I think we often imagine these conversations are going to be more difficult than they are because we have them so infrequently we think and I need to talk about this and this and this and this and then, oh, my goodness, everything gets loaded on and it's suddenly this huge can of worms to deal with.

But certainly what I talk about in the book and in the survival series for the pandemic and these kind of things is if you break it down into little chunks, these are actually 10, 15 minute conversations. Maybe pick off one a week. One every couple of weeks.

And many of these conversations, I think the hardest conversation is when we have to negotiate and agree something, but many of these conversations is I just need to understand you. Like what do you need from me? How can I best give it? There's no conflict there, I just need to know. If I think about that next 5 year conversation, what are some of the things that are important to you? And how can we look at supporting each other? That's not a conflict conversation.

The slightly more difficult conversations are like, OK, whose career is taking priority right now and when might we swap? These are slightly more tricky. But I think what happens is, and what's really interesting is when you talk to couples in their early days, not necessarily young couples, but in the first few years of their relationship, they're brilliant at having these conversations. We have them all the time. If you think back to that honeymoon period, you're always talking about what do you want out of life? And what is a good life going to look like? And then we just stop having them. And it's because life gets busy.

So it's not that we can't, we don't have the skills, we don't have the capacity, because I bet you did it a lot in the early days. Just life passes by and we assume we know. But guess what? You know, what your partner wanted at 28 is not the same as what he or she wants at 48. We think, we assume we know them without thinking.

And very often when couples have these conversations even sometimes when I'm in workshops we just do like 10 minute little buzz groups where they have a little conversation. It's like, I never knew 10 minutes is all it can take. So I think it's a little bit about demystifying what these conversations are about. This is not about psychoanalysis, not that that's a bad thing. This is not about stretching the depths of your soul. This is really about thinking, what do I want? How can we help each other get it and how can we get the balance that's good for us?

### **Meagen Gibson**

And one of the things I was just thinking about, as well as you have these conversations, you make an agreement, this person's career is going to take priority or you make a choice. And then even if the ground of your being is not shaken by the consequences of that, it might just be something as simple as I'm a lot lonelier than I used to be because I didn't know that this was how, you know, all the things that you feel after the decision takes place.

So these quick check-ins of, I know we made this agreement. Is there anything you know now that you didn't understand when we made it? Just asking the question. And how can I support you through that?

**Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:28:03]**

Yeah. And I certainly think it's a really healthy thing, just once or twice a year minimum and every major transition point, just to go out for a nice dinner or have a takeout in and just have some undivided time just to talk these things through. It doesn't need to be every week. It doesn't even need to be every month.

But just, and I sometimes think of anniversaries as a good time to do this. Not necessarily the wedding anniversary but the start of the year. So I don't know about you, I have kids and they're a little bit older now, and we always do a thing at the end of the year. You know, what were the good things that happened? What do we hope for next year? It's quite a fun family activity. I know a lot of families do that.

So I think a lot of people tend to think things through at junctions like that. But we don't often share it. We often do that private thinking but don't share it. It might be over the summer when we have a little bit more downtime, you've got the mojito on the beach or whatever, and we start to have these conversations.

So it's just about making that part of your family routine, your couple routine, and then it really takes the heat off it.

**Meagen Gibson**

One of my questions was going to be, is there ever a time that you recommend not having these conversations? Because I can imagine a time it would be constructive, but I'd love to hear from you.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah. So obviously, if there's a lot of emotional heat you need to wait to calm down. But I would also say you've got to have these conversations before you're faced with a major decision. Once you have the job offer on the table, the positive pregnancy test, whatever it is.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right, right.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

It's very loaded to try and start pulling these things apart.

So it's really important we take a step back before, especially if we know there's a likelihood of a transition, and we say, OK, one of you is going on the job market. There's lots of things that come up but let's look at boundaries. What if you get offered a job in San Francisco? Is that in or out? And to put some boundaries up first really takes the heat off the decision making.

Also, if we think about having children, which is a big one for couples, it's obviously a huge decision on many levels, but often we go into it with assumptions.

So I was working with a couple once, a younger couple, they'd been married a few years. They both really wanted kids. He was really pushing and she was holding back. And this was really leading to conflict. And I spoke to them separately and she said, well, the thing is, he travels a lot with this job and I know I will basically be a full time mum in the week. And I was like, have you spoke to him about this? I mean, there's no need. I can see his travel schedule. I know this is happening.

I speak to him and he's like, I don't know what the issue is. I've already identified the role I'm going to take. And as soon as she's pregnant, I've got this role lined up where I don't need to travel anymore. I'm like, have you told her? Well, no, we're not pregnant yet. So why would I bring it up? Locking horns

over these assumptions, which in their mind are real, are true. But actually, if they'd shared that there would be no issue. And this happens time and time again.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:31:14]**

That's so interesting. I mean, she identified a problem. He'd already identified that solution, but they just hadn't spoken about it at all. So how would they know? And her assumptions about what would happen to her and how it would impact her if they had just been spoken. Yeah, I completely understand that and relate to it a lot.

Because I imagined that exact scenario or when some of those practicalities that we talk about the day in and day out, if there's a miscommunication or a misalignment then that's not necessarily the time to say, you know, let's reevaluate everything. I'd love to talk about this right now in the heat of the moment.

So I know that you mentioned in the book, and I think you've mentioned here as well, that the imbalances in power can be a relationship killer. And I'd love for you to talk about, more about that and what the consequences are of those imbalances of power.

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah. So maybe first you say, what is power in a relationship.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Right, yeah yeah.

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Power is really the power to pursue the things you want to pursue. So are you empowered to go after the career goals? The personal goals? The couple goals?

Now, what we find is that early on in almost all relationships, it's fairly balanced. We know each other, we're newly in love, we really want to support each other. We try to lift each other up.

But very often what happens over time is the scales tip, such that one person becomes the supporting crew. Now, that does not necessarily mean practically supporting. It's not necessarily the person who earns the most, who has the most powerful at a high status job. In fact, not at all. It's more psychologically. Am I getting support to go forward?

So let me give you an example. One couple I worked with, a very kind of senior career couple, he was a CEO. So on the surface, very powerful, very well paid, very high status. But as I started talking to him he said, like, I just have no power in the relationship. I'm like, how does that work? And he said, well, my wife is an entrepreneur. Great. And so at every point in time, it made sense for me to carry on, on my career path. I'm earning the most I can support her. She can kind of follow these ventures she's really passionate about. And at every point I've wanted to do something different, but I've been successful, which is great, not complaining about that. So it just made sense for me to trudge on.

And of course, here they are now in their mid 50s. On the surface, he's very successful and powerful, but he feels as if in one way he's wasted his career. There were things he wanted to do but he was trapped in the cycle to support his wife in her passions. And this happens very, very often that one of us subjugates our own desires for the other.

Now, of course, at any moment in time, there's no such thing as a 50/50 partnership, we're always a little bit off. And that's fine as long as we're moving like this. But many couples move like this. And, of course, what happens is as we start to move apart, where one person is continually giving and the

other person continually taking, is that resentment can grow. And initially this can show up in the, did you pick up the milk? Fight after work. But really almost always it explodes into the resentment. And of course, what we know from relationship research is once resentment gets into a relationship, it's very, very hard to walk back from that because there's a sense of bitterness and then it's really hard to balance that.

So, and this is why what I find in my research it's very important for couples to keep a check on the long term, because we so often say to ourselves, oh, it makes sense for me to ... fill in the gap. Well, it may make sense today, but then you get into a pattern and in 5 years time it's suddenly not going to make sense anymore. It's going to make you feel quite resentful.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:35:17]**

I was having to write while you were talking so I wouldn't forget. But so, what it sounds like you're saying is that success is not necessarily, or power isn't success, it's choice and freedom or the availability of choice and freedom. Right?

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Exactly. Exactly.

And I feel if I'm empowered, I feel that. And again, it's not about achieving it. It's that I had a shot. Did I have these things that are important to me? And again, they may not just be professional. It's like, I played the piano as a child. I really want to take it back up. Are you supporting me to do that or am I constantly saying, well, I can't quite fit the piano lessons in. It makes sense because the children are young. And then I have to be the taxi service because the kids are going to, you know. And suddenly the kids have left home and 20 years have passed and you never got to rekindle that passion. It's equally about things like that.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I can see that absolutely, because it's very easy to dismiss those types of desires if they don't provide monetary value. Right?

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

And if you think about this, this really comes back to a question of identity. You know, who am I? What is important to me?

And I often do a fun exercise with people, which is, take a piece of paper and write at the top, who am I? And you have 10 words, 10 separate words, not a 10 word sentence. They might be adjectives. They might be roles. And just brainstorm the 10.

So I'm sure a couple will be professional. So think of me it's like author, professor, but there's also skier and cook and pianist and gardener and friend. And if you look at the list and then think, where I am dedicating my time? And which of the 10 are you supporting me in? Or even which of these 10 do I even tell you about? And which of these 10 do I hide under the carpet and not share or have I asked about and not gotten support for. You'll be really surprising.

And it's actually quite a fun exercise to do with your partner. List your 10 and what pops up? But you'll probably be quite surprised.

Now, of course, the idea is not that you spend a 10th of your time on each.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Right, right.

**Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:37:25]**

The idea is just thinking, am I investing enough for me in these different pieces of myself? And obviously you don't need to limit yourself to 10.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, but it does force you to get really serious about what is the most important to you. And oftentimes I find that when people do that type of evaluation, sometimes if they've not had these conversations enough, that there's literally nothing like a cook or gardener or painter, there's nothing that resembles fun or expression or they've kind of dissociated from that part of themselves because there's so much to do. There's so much to manage. There's so much to, other things to prioritize. So I can see how that kind of gets away from you.

And even if you are able to express all those things, when's the last time that you expressed to your partner that that was incredibly important to make space for? Or that that was part of being supported in your full expression of who you want to be in the world?

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

When was the last time your partner praised you for those things which were not about caring for the children, fixing the house or career? Right. Like, wow, that's a really great painting. You're so talented. Well, you know, I love listening to you play that instrument in the background or I love that you're super passionate about CrossFit, whatever it is.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right, whatever it is.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

It's like, can we acknowledge our partners whole selves rather than just these boxes that benefit us?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yes, absolutely, and I love that your book reflects all types of couples, regardless of gender and couple make up, but the reality of the situation, especially in the U.S., and maybe you can speak more to what's happening in Europe, is that COVID has taken three million women out of the U.S. workforce for a lot of the reasons in the conversations that we're talking about here. A lot of people that wasn't a conversation, I'm sure, that they felt like they had a lot of power or freedom or choice. And so, as people are reckoning with the repercussions of those forced choices, what would you recommend as far as how they have those conversations?

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah, it's a really good topic to address. And when I look at COVID, so I remember the first wave of the pandemic, I don't know if you remember, but it hit Italy hard first and my husband is from Italy. So obviously my mother in law is there and she called me up and she said, well, Jennifer, it's either going to be a third child or a divorce. But it turns out she was right.

And what we see has happened in COVID is in some ways it's not changed anything. What it's done is amplified dynamics that were already there. And so what happens is, if we look towards COVID there's couples where the women have borne the brunt. They were bearing the brunt before, but they were just about hanging on. They had the support network. The schools were open. They could just about manage. So it's not that anything changed per say. It's just that, if you think of a gas cooker, the gas was turned up and the heat was too much for them.

Likewise, what we see is in couples who had their support system sorted, we see the rise of the third child or the second honeymoon or whatever that is. So what we've seen is a polarization of couples. But again, I don't think it's about COVID per say. I think those dynamics were there. But what's happened is they've been revealed.

And I think this is really important to realize, because I think the worst thing we can do is as we get back to normal, think, well, OK, well, that's finished. We can get back to normal. If you're in one of those couples where you became very polarized, it's because something wasn't working before. And the pandemic just made it that bit harder.

So it's really important we don't sweep that under the carpet and bracket that experience and think it was because of the pandemic and now we'll be OK. It's really important you go back to fundamentals and think about why really in our couple did this happen? Yes, the gas was turned up. But why did it fall on my shoulders or why did it fall on your shoulders?

And this will tend to be one of three things. One is we both have big careers, but we don't co-parent or we don't co-look after the house. And of course, if you have double primary, you need to be co-administrators, but very often that's not true. And of course, if you have a mismatch like that, it's a huge amount of pressure. So this is one of the major reasons for working couples. There's a mismatch between our career prioritization and our parenting or the caregiving prioritization.

And another thing is that we've just not spoken up. So very often it's easy to blame the men. But actually, if you take a hard look at yourself, were you really speaking up and saying, actually I'm doing a lot? Because when we study those practical tasks, which I don't mean to ignore, they are important, what we often see is that you don't see what you don't do.

A simple example is, I love gardening, but I'm not a big waterer right? My husband was spending sometimes an hour a day watering the garden. But it's not on my radar, I'm doing other stuff. And he's like, hang on, a whole hour and many days over the summer I'm there watering the garden and it's because I don't see it.

So, I think a big part is what if this is unspoken? What didn't you say and what do you need to put on the table now? And I think particularly with those tasks a really helpful exercise is to literally get a sheet of paper, probably a big one, and literally list every single household task and put the name against it, who does what? And you will be surprised. You will be surprised, firstly, how imbalanced you are. And you will probably also be surprised by some tasks that your partner does that just were not on your mind. And then obviously revisit that and redesign it.

And when we look at the research on time allocation with these practical tasks, we see the best, best way to tackle them is to divide and conquer. So you take care of the gardening, I take care of all the financial stuff. We think about children, my husband and I have an agreement that he takes care of everything, health care. So, dentist, doctors, vaccination, I don't even think about it. But when it comes to, like social activities, friends party's, sleepovers, that's my domain.

The reason that's really important when we divide and conquer is because in fact, the biggest stress is not the doing. The biggest stress is the keeping it all in mind. When do they need that vaccination? And what's the name of the dentist? And you know, it's not taking them to the dentist, that's half an hour job. It's remembering all this stuff.

And what happens when we divide and conquer is we take stuff off our mental to-do-list. If I know Meagen's doing these 10 things, that's 10 things I never need to think about.

So this is a really good way of rebalancing, but also getting rid of that administration burden. Rather than just thinking about who does what. What you really need to think about is who thinks about what?

**Meagen Gibson - [00:44:58]**

And that's a really interesting reframe because I know I'm great at saying, you know, I'm really doing a lot and then saying, can you help me with X, Y and Z? But I've never shifted ownership of X, Y, Z, and I think I'm going to have a conversation later.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

And the problem is Meagen your, you have a husband, right?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yes, yeah.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah. Your husband is then, you're essentially his boss. Which let me tell you..

**Meagen Gibson**

I don't want that role.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

That is never a good dynamic. Never be your partner's boss. And because he's going to resent you for that. Even though you are still doing most of the work, it's like, she's bossing me around again, and she's given me this big to-do-list. And we've all done it, Meagen, but the best thing to do is to sit down and say, OK, these are yours. I'm never going to ask about them. I just know you're going to get them done. A lot less on your plate.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

And the visual that I had in my head when you were talking about the burners going back on and people reentering the workforce or reevaluating things once COVID lifts and we can go back to normal, is like the visualization of one of the partners is like on a high, like hanging off the edge of a building by like one fingertip. And COVID was like the boot on the fingers.

And so what we don't want to do is like climb back up to that height and reassume our position hanging on one finger. That would be ludicrous.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah. Perfect metaphor. Yeah.

And I fear that's what a lot of couples will do because we think it's about the pandemic, but it's not. It's not about the pandemic. This is about what you set up before, which came home to roost when the pressure got turned up.

**Meagen Gibson**

So if somebody wants to approach the subject of power imbalances with their partner, obviously they should order your book. But outside of that, how would you recommend that someone begin? Like practically speaking, somebody gets done with this. They've watched us talk this through and they know that they need to have one of these conversations. How do they do it? I'm not asking for myself. I'm asking for everyone else.

## **Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:47:06]**

A friend, a close friend. Right?

So, first of all, never go in and say we need a discussion about power in our couple. That is not going to present very good. This is really about baby steps. And what I find is it's very rare that a partner has consciously tried to grab the power. What's happened is, what we call in France, folie a deux, you've got yourself in a tangle. And this almost always comes from a lack of understanding rather than a malicious or kind of I'm going to grab what I can.

And so, of course, the best way to start is to start rebuilding the foundations of those understandings. So start with that conversation, maybe the 5 year conversation and that's such an easy conversation because you don't need to create anything. Just list what we want.

And again, especially if you feel in the less powerful position, your partner will probably be like, I didn't realize that. Oh my goodness, I never thought about it. And what you will see is the balance start to shift a little bit already just building that understanding.

Then the conversation about support. How do we support each other? And what I find when I work with couples is you actually very rarely need to name a power imbalance. If you start having these foundational conversations, it becomes evident and people want to readjust. Because I think the best way to go into this conversation is with the assumption that your partner loves you. They want the best for you. Go get it. Which is as much your doing as there's to be honest. It's very easy to look at it and say they never ask. They don't get it. They don't understand. But it's like have you told them?

And I think we need to take responsibility for ourselves and really, if you're feeling in that position take time to educate your partner, but also educate yourself, because you may find that a lot of the work you've been taking on has been unnecessary, that you're trying hard to support in a way that actually your partner doesn't need or doesn't appreciate.

So what I find with most couples is simply building this understanding can go a long way to start to rebalance. And then I think once you have that understanding, it's really sitting down and saying, OK, I know we've not talked about career prioritization, but I've noticed for quite a long time you've been in the prime position. And I'd love to have a conversation about how can we rebalance that or maybe switch over time.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Or even. I'm so sorry to interrupt you, but I imagine even just languaging in the way of I'm wondering if we can have a conversation about how I might meet some of my needs or my goals or my aspirations instead of how can we shift the power?

## **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Exactly. I would never use the word power, but I think if we have that common understanding, it's much easier then to go into the what can we do about this conversation? But if you lead with the I'm unhappy. This isn't working. Something's got to change. You're immediately going to get the barriers up.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Right. And I know in a lot of couples sometimes when there's that power imbalance that the, well 9 times out of 10, the one person feels like they're doing everything and the other partner, necessarily maybe on the home front, and the other partner says, what do you mean? Everything I do is for this family. How many times have we heard that dynamic of, well, even though I'm gone a lot, I work a ton, everything I'm doing is for us. How could you possibly think that I'm not contributing enough when everything I do is to make the contribution to this family.



**Jennifer Petriglieri - [00:50:44]**

Exactly. And this happens for two reasons. One is because, of course, we value the things we do most. We all do this. But secondly we think in really single track. So if you take it even further out, OK, let's say your partner is really into playing some kind of sport, hockey, football, whatever on the weekends. And the ungenerous way to think about that is, oh my goodness, it's another two hours. I have to fill in the gap. Be with the parents, look after the kids, look after the house. You can look at it in that way.

Another way to look at it is actually when my partner does that, they come back re-charged. They're much better in their role as partner, as father, as mother, as everything else. So in fact, them taking that time is also a gift to the family. And I think we often forget about piece.

We think about self care as this luxury item. But actually the research shows the opposite. If you put self care first, you outperform in all your other roles. And I think we tend to think, and we also feel guilty like, oh, do you mind if I go to the yoga class? Is that a real inconvenience? As opposed to actually, if I go to this yoga class, I'm going to be much more pleasant to be around.

And so I think that piece is even more difficult to acknowledge. It's a gift to the family as opposed to taking time out.

Now, obviously, these things can go too far, right? If you go golfing for the whole weekend, every weekend, we clearly see this is an issue. Not that there's a problem with golf but just an example.

**Meagen Gibson**

Getting away from you a little bit.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah. Yeah.

But if this is at a moderate level, it's actually really helpful.

**Meagen Gibson**

And one last thing before we wrap up. I wanted to have a conversation quickly about boundaries and exactly defining the parameters for what you've seen in your conversations with couples about what boundaries consist of sometimes what they're considering as boundaries in these conversations?

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Yeah, so it's a great question. Boundaries is one of these words that's really overused and then people will say, what does that mean?

**Meagen Gibson**

Right, right.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Really, I think of it as how do you define the field you're playing on? And if you're really clear on your boundaries, we're playing in that field and anywhere else, that's not our field. That's a different ball game, right? That's not our ball game.

And I often think of four types of boundaries, especially for working couples. One is geography, right? What is in and what is out of our playing field. This is really, really important because what it does is it takes uncertainty off the table. And we know that the biggest cause of stress is uncertainty.

So if I know that we are restricted to this area, that area, whatever it is, it takes a lot of uncertainty off the table, makes decision making a lot easier. Best way to draw this boundary, literally, is get a map of the puzzle thing. And you're both circling cities or countries, depending on the sort of careers you have. You'd get a different color pen each. And any circle which has both colors is in. The rest of the world is out. Really simple.

Another boundary is time. Now, of course, we always face that exceptional week where we have to give all to whatever it is. Whether it's our kids, to our work, to our parents. But on average, how much time is enough or too much in our various domains? So that includes work. That also includes a couple. How much time do we need for each other? That might include parenting. That's also about ourself.

Again, having these kind of circles around this time. It's like, OK, if you go 4 weeks and you've not ticked any time in that couple box, you're going to be having a conversation about that. So being really clear. And also this is partly a support thing. What do I need in each of these boxes? And again, that might be slightly different for you.

The third, which I laugh at now, but by the autumn we will be back at it is travel. Many of our jobs require quite a bit of travel, which puts a lot of pressure on the partner. How much travel is too much travel? Is a really important part.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:54:55]**

Or even if both partners are traveling right?

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

Oh yeah, even worse.

And the fourth boundary, which we very rarely think about is the boundary between our nuclear family and our extended family. This boundary is the biggest cause of stress in couples. So, how much time is too much with your parents in law? What do we do about family holidays? If you can square that off, you get a lot of stress off the table.

Now obviously in times of COVID we were also talking about boundaries within the house. Where are you working? These are more micro boundaries. But if we think of those big four boundaries, if you can square those off and agree them, your life will become a lot less stressful, a lot easier to make decisions and a lot less uncertainty. Of course, they don't solve everything, but they're a really helpful starting point.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic, wonderful. I have a much better understanding of boundaries, and I think everybody watching will as well. And that's a great place to start.

Thank you for joining me. If people want to learn more about you and your work, where should they go?

### **Jennifer Petriglieri**

So my website is [www.jpetriglieri.com](http://www.jpetriglieri.com) and I imagine you'll maybe have a link to it. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

That's the best place or read the book which you can get.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:56:14]**

Yes. Here we go. *Couples That Work*. It's fantastic. I've put all my Post-its and notes in it. I will hold on to this one for a long time.

Jennifer, thank you very much.

**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Thanks for having me Meagen.