

Effects of job stress on family relationships

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In the short-term, daily job stressors influence family interactions through their impact on the employed person's mood, thoughts, and coping behaviors. In the long-term, family relationships can be shaped by those experiences in both positive and negative ways. Some spouse 'cross-over' effects appear to represent accommodations of the employed partner under stress — for instance, a spouse's increased provision of social support and involvement with children — and are evidence of dynamics that go beyond a simple and direct transfer of stress from work to home.

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An interest in how experiences at work shape family life is part of a larger perspective acknowledging that families are not cloistered from the outside world and are best understood within their broader social ecologies. Of course there are many ways that jobs can influence families; one is through the impact that occupational stressors have on family relationships. We know that the effects of a stressful experience on cognition, emotion, and physiology do not necessarily evaporate when there is a switch to a new social context; the residue on the body and the mind can continue to have consequences in the next situation. The term *spillover* is sometimes used to refer to that process of carry-over of internal states from one setting to another.

As depicted in [Figure 1](#), there are both direct and indirect effects of the stressful experiences at work on family interactions. The term *negative mood spillover* refers to expressions of impatience, frustration and irritability at home that result directly from negative mood originally generated earlier at work. The connection is indirect inasmuch as behavior at home represents attempts to

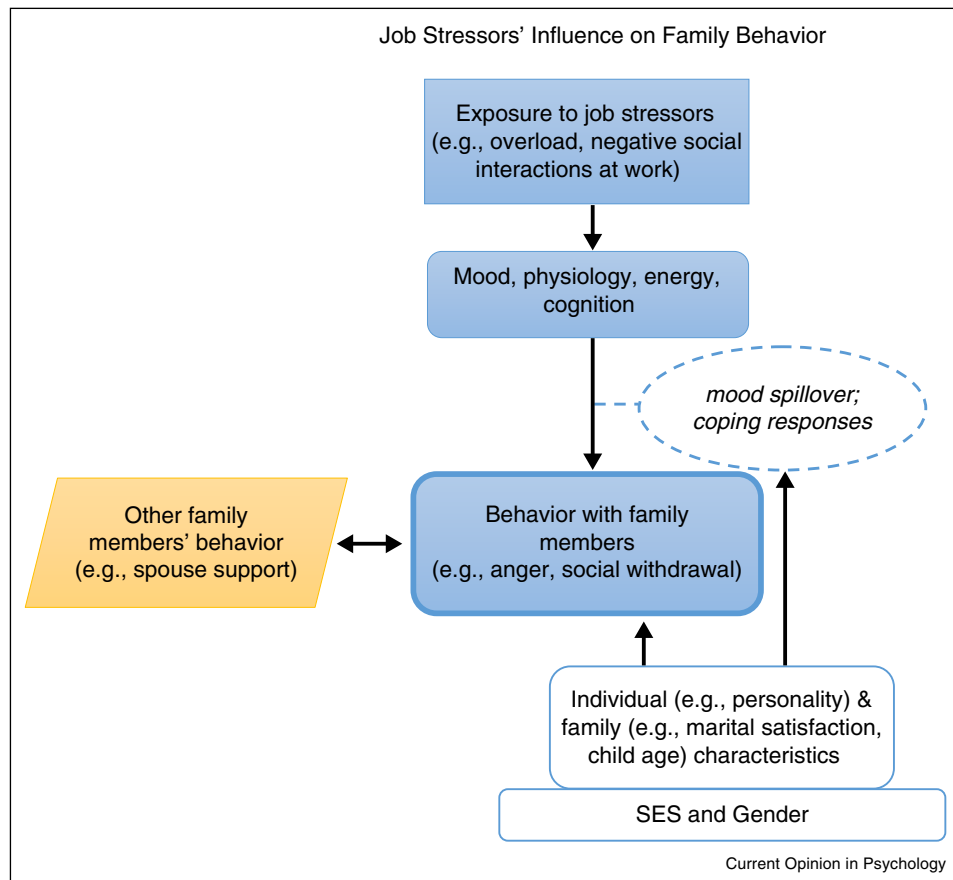
cope with, and recover from, the lingering effects of stress exposures earlier at work. An example is social withdrawal from family members in an effort to avoid tense interactions and to return to baseline levels of emotion and energy. In addition, the repercussions of job stressors are sometimes observed in a spouse's behavior, another type of indirect outcome, often referred to as a cross-over effect. Studies of spillover and cross-over uncover gender differences, as well as individual and family differences, in these work-family processes.

Spillover as a short-term process

The use of intensive repeated measures (IRM) to observe 'spillover' processes as they unfold dates back over 25 years [1,2]. These studies capitalize on day-to-day variability in experiences at work and behavior at home to test short-term, within-subjects associations between a job variable and a family outcome. In order to appropriately test the temporal sequencing of work and family variables presumed in a spillover model, the optimal research designs separate — in time and space — the assessment of work and family variables: job experiences are described at work and descriptions of after-work family behavior are provided later in the day at home. IRM studies with these design features have incorporated objective measures of job stressors [2], and employed individuals' daily behavior has been assessed by spouse reports [3,4] and by video recordings [5].

Two common patterns of short-term responses to daily job stressors are social withdrawal and increases in irritability and displays of anger. Studies that assess different types of job stressors have suggested that days with a high number and pace of job demands and those characterized by distressing social interactions at work may differentially elicit these two behavioral reactions [2,4,5]. Rather than focus specifically on behavior, some studies test short-term effects of spillover on patterns of family interaction. For example, on days with more supervisor criticism mothers describe more harsh and more withdrawn interactions with their preschool-aged children [6]. That study also tested next-day effects and found that supervisor criticisms were followed by declines in warm mother-child interactions on the following day (after adjusting for the following day's supervisor interactions). Evidence suggests that short-term spillover effects vary depending on individual and family characteristics, such as levels of conflict and marital satisfaction [3,4]. Spouses in high-conflict families [4] and those who report more symptoms of depression [5] may be especially vulnerable to the short-term effects of job stressors on behavior with family members.

Figure 1



Job stressors' influence on family behavior.

Daily stressors that are only partially connected to experiences at work, such as the total hours spent working each day (both paid and unpaid) [7] and daily perceptions of overload from both work and non-work tasks and responsibilities [8^{*}], have also been linked with changes in daily patterns of family interaction. Both types of studies have shown that negative mood as well as other cognitive and emotional experiences, such as the desire to avoid social interaction, help to mediate spillover effects [4,8^{*},9].

Stable patterns of spillover

Just as erratic trickles from everyday rainfall may carve deeper and deeper ruts into soil that overtime become entrenched, short-term spillover processes may accumulate and establish more stable patterns of work and family dynamics. For instance, patterns of short-term spillover responses in IRM studies were used to create individual-difference variables that reflect a tendency to react to a stressful day in a particular way (e.g., with anger, or disregard, or distancing), and those spillover patterns were correlated with both the individual's and the spouse's marital dissatisfaction [8^{*}].

Two recent studies testing stable associations between perceptions of job stress and family behavior capitalized on an ethnographic video archive of the daily routines and social interactions of dual-earner families. One found that the wives' self-reported job stress predicted naturalistic observations of their own and their husbands' support behavior. Wives who reported more job stress were observed receiving *more* support from their husbands, both because they solicited more and because their husbands offered more support. There was no link between husbands' job stress and couple support behavior [10^{**}]. A separate analysis of the recordings revealed individual differences in spillover: high-neuroticism husbands who reported high levels of job stress displayed more negative and engaged social behavior, whereas low-neuroticism husbands with high job stress showed social withdrawal behaviors, operationalized as a decrease in emotion display and involvement with family members [11].

Given that some of the roots of work-family research lie in the maternal employment literature of the 1970s, it is not surprising that there has been much interest in the effects

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