

Welcome to Column 16 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/about/career.html>

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HEY JANE!

“My partner and I have both been offered fantastic jobs in different states. We are trying to decide whether or not to attempt a commuter relationship, what advice can you give us?”

JANE SAYS:

Congratulations on your job offers. Should you decide to begin a commuter relationship, much of your experience will be unique to you and your partner and your individual personalities and relationship dynamics.

Let me begin by saying that some people report many positive aspects of commuter relationships. If the job opportunities that present themselves are as fantastic as you suggest, then your actual work lives might be much more satisfying than if you accepted less than fantastic jobs in the same location. Also consider the joy of eating whatever you want for dinner, whenever you want to; having flexibility in your daily schedule; having time to write without interruption, to develop friendships, or to attend an evening lecture without cutting in to "couple time." Some of this may not be possible if you have children and are the primary parent. However, there are also some positive aspects of being the primary parent in your children's lives. You can develop special routines and rituals and have more flexibility in those routines as well as be involved in the children's school and other activities. While being the primary parent can be exhausting, it also has some great rewards.

With that said, there are some challenges that you may want to consider as you make your decision.

My first bit of advice is to make sure you communicate, not just about your initial decision to become a commuter couple, but often and regularly about how the arrangement is working for you. When deciding whether or not to attempt a commuter relationship, you'll want to talk about:

- What other alternatives do you have?
- How often will you realistically be able to be together (every weekend, once a month, etc.)?
- Who will do more of the commuting?
- How often will you re-evaluate your situation?
- If you have children, where will they live?

- **Financial Concerns:** If you are in a commuter relationship with someone from the corporate world, the company might subsidize some of the expense. This type of financial support for commuter relationships is highly unlikely in the academic world. Consider the cost of travel. Does your commute require driving or flying? How often will your schedules and your checkbooks allow you to be together? Can you arrange for housing that is conveniently located near the airport, bus or train station, or highway to make the commute a little bit easier? Will you be maintaining two households? Do they both need to be “full size” or can one be smaller than what you would normally want? If you will be living together for extended periods of time during the summer or other academic breaks, will you be in an area where it would be relatively easy to sublet? Another financial concern that is less obvious involves health care. If either of you will be spending a considerable amount of time in a different state (or different city), will your health care plans cover any doctor’s visits or emergency room visits that happen outside of your area?
- **Coordinating schedules:** Academics sometimes have the luxury of being more flexible than other professions/occupations. However, some academic departments might not be very flexible. Be sure to find out if you will have flexibility in your schedule or will you, as the new person, have to teach M, W, F at 8:00 am and 4:00pm, limiting your weekend travel schedule? Given the flexibility many companies now have with telecommuting and flextime, it is entirely possible that a non-academic partner may be the one with the most flexibility in terms of commuting.
- **Your Relationship:** If you do choose to commute, be sure to make time for yourselves (as a couple). This is especially difficult if you have children because the absent partner may feel guilty about not spending all their time with the children when they are there but you have to attend to your relationship, too! It’s easy to become very independent of each other (you probably already are very independent people or you wouldn’t be considering this option!). Make sure you spend time doing things you enjoy together and not just sitting together while you grade papers. Talk about your work and your life so your partner knows about your colleagues, your classes, whatever is important to you.
- **Integrating friendship and social networks:** What affect will a commuter relationship have on you and your partner’s ability to form social and support networks individually and together? Will you feel “left out” when you visit because you do not know your partner’s friends (and vice versa)? If you are spending every weekend together and treating it like a romantic holiday, will it keep both of you from building beneficial social networks in the places where you live and work? Meeting your partner’s friends and colleagues (and vice versa) is important to help stay connected to each others lives but also, if at some time, you both end up living together in one place, the new "resident" will feel more at home and have some ready made networks in place.
- **Parenting:** If you have children, you will have to decide where the children will live. If the primary caretaker is in an academic position, she or he might want to try to live near campus where there will be lots of available (student) babysitters. Kids can benefit greatly from having relationships with college students and many college students miss being in a family situation. Many commuting parents compare

their situation to that of a single parent. But, unlike a single parent who might be able to make solo decisions, commuter couples (like some divorced or separated couples) have to try to negotiate co-parenting from a distance. When I was a teenager, my parents spent nearly a year in a commuter relationship. I remember when, to my father's horror and disbelief, my mother let me start "dating." My father felt left out of the loop on that decision and also seemed to feel left out during his weekends home because we had all developed busy lives and schedules during the week that didn't include him. Some commuters suggest finding ways to stay in touch during the week (like email or text messaging) and also finding ways to keep the absent parent "present" in the family by talking about them and what they are doing ("I heard from mom today and she said he has a big meeting in Chicago tomorrow.") and keeping them involved in plans ("Be sure to call dad and tell him when your school play is.").

- Reuniting: The possibility of ending up in the same place again (or for some people for the first time) probably does not seem like a challenge. But many commuter couples report difficulties learning to be together after long separations. For some this difficulty has to do with learning to blend work and personal life when they have been used to more separate or compartmentalized living. For example, you both might cram everything in at work during the week, so that when you're together you're "on vacation." One summer my husband worked in a different state for 12 weeks. I missed him, but I LOVED having the house to myself and having an orderly and routine schedule. When he returned, it took a while to readjust to his more chaotic and messy lifestyle (a lifestyle that seems to work perfectly well for him). Whichever partner makes the move will also have to adjust to a new job. For an assistant level academic position this will involve negotiating a new tenure clock (see Hey Jane #15 for advice on negotiating job offers). If you and your partner are actively attempting to find jobs in the same place, see Hey Jane #10 for advice on negotiating dual-hires.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask for help and/or support. You'd be surprised at how many other couples have been in this situation or are currently commuting. Try and find these people and use them for advice and support.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned for next month's question on retirement.

-- Jane

Do you have a question for Jane?

Do you have experience or "expertise" about an upcoming question?

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