



TWELVE GENTLE RULES

How a Couple Can Live Together *Peacefully*
When One of Them Is an Entrepreneur

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ENTREPRENEURS ARE OBSESSED AND DRIVEN.

I ought to know—I've been living with one for over 25 years. My husband, Gary, cofounded Stonyfield Yogurt in 1983 with “seven cows and a dream.” He has built the company to over \$370 million in revenue, and Stonyfield is now the largest manufacturer of organic yogurt in the world. But for the first nine years after Gary and his partner, Samuel Kaymen, launched the company, we hovered near bankruptcy. Had they not been all-in, completely focused, and on call 24/7, the business would have failed back when those seven cows produced all the milk we needed.

Clearly, when it comes to business-building, some degree of obsession is required—or soon the business won't be around to obsess about. The problem arises when entrepreneurs try to simultaneously enjoy a thriving family life while they are growing a successful company. Business-building introduces the obvious pressures that arise when free time is scarce, but the financial risk and uncertainty also become sources of tension. Combined with the classic entrepreneurial personality—the tendency to need to be the boss, to make the decisions, and to go it solo—the entrepreneurial life can be difficult for spouses to endure. At the very least, this cocktail can introduce resentment and friction into the relationship. This is

somewhat compensated for by many other characteristics endemic to the entrepreneurial breed: dynamism, confidence, and a sense of optimism—which, after all, are often what attracted us regular folks to entrepreneurs in the first place.

Personality traits notwithstanding, both spouses are aware that most startups fail. But the entrepreneur secretly believes that he will be the lucky one, and that by dint of his persistence and smarts, his business will survive. The spouse is not so sure. She wonders: does the entrepreneur's desperation to make the business successful cloud his ability to make good decisions? He wants to take out a line of credit on their home to buy a piece of expensive equipment; she is terrified of risking the roof over their heads. That chronic doubt and concern frequently result in what Gary calls the “double penalty”: intense stress at work compounded by intense stress at home. The spouse risks that the entrepreneur will equate her doubt about the business's prospects with doubt about him—his smarts, his follow-through, his ability to properly assess risk.

In most relationships, these issues go undiscussed. They brew silently until they erupt in arguments. Ideally, entrepreneurs and their spouses should identify the issues and agree to work on them before they become red-hot. To that end, I have created some “Gentle Rules” for couples in which one person is an entrepreneur. They are based on my own experience and that of the hundreds of people I've interviewed in the course of writing my book and my column for Inc. magazine. My hope is that the “Rules” will help entrepreneurs and their spouses identify some

of these sore spots, and will provide some useful suggestions for resolving them—or at least reducing the friction they create. (At the very least, you will be gratified to see that you are not alone in wrestling with these issues.)

One entrepreneur summarized the quandary this way: How does someone who is obsessed live with someone who's not? The short answer is: empathize, compromise, and make sure your spouse knows that he or she matters most. Below are some suggestions for how to do just that.

I } Set the bar low but set it somewhere. It's difficult to make time for one another, much less take that desperately needed vacation. But you can sit down together for a cup of coffee or take a walk around the block. Sometimes that's all Gary and I had time for, but usually it was enough to keep us connected. With these small gestures, we sent a signal to each other that the other person was a priority, even during a hectic day. Every couple needs uninterrupted time to share those grace notes and headaches that comprise lives. Being together reminds you that you enjoy being together.

Since I live with a sports nut, I'll also express it this way: learn to play small ball. Runs can be scored with a big blast, or through a series of smaller base hits. In both cases you score, but the odds of success are greater when you take it one base at a time. Likewise, you may not be able to score the big runs routinely with your family—a two week work-free vacation in the tropics, for

example. But don't let that take your eye off the smaller wins. Part of the art of creating "work-life balance" is learning to cultivate small moments. They present themselves more often than you might think. Don't let them slip by.

2 } Turn off the smart phone. OK, you can leave it to buzz and bleep sometimes, or even most of the time. But be disciplined about carving out technology-free stretches. Even if you don't respond to the device's whining, its presence at the restaurant, on the dining-room table, or by the bed affects the quality of your family's shared space. And a holiday with an omnipresent smartphone is less a vacation than a change in venue. In any case, your Blackberry looks great in black leather. Slide her into that holster, and everyone will be happier.

Making chunks of time tech-free should be one of those behaviors that is assumed, but most of us are now smartphone addicts. Our compulsive behavior silently permits others to also stay perpetually wired. For families, it is beyond critical to insist on uninterrupted time, during which you have one another's undivided attention—which is, these days, the most precious gift we can bestow. The dinner table is a good place to insist on this.

3 } Prioritize each other's communications. Both of you are busy and can be hard to reach. You respect one another's time too much to phone or email about trivial matters. (When I call Gary at the office, he knows I'm not just curious about how the yogurt is coming out today.)

You'll both be more relaxed if it's easier to get in touch, and if you know that one another's missives will move to the top of the queue.

We're all inundated with important messages—entrepreneurs doubly so. Making sure to respond quickly to a spouse's communiques is another way for busy people to signal that they care, and that their spouse comes first.

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4 } Befriend other company-building families. Talking with couples that are in the same stage of business building will offer an opportunity to commiserate and share solutions. Those who have been on the entrepreneurial ride longer than you have will empathize and can offer advice from their own experiences. Does the entrepreneur have a business mentor? Ask the mentor's spouse to join the conversation, too.

For both entrepreneur and spouse, business-building can be isolating and is often marked by loneliness. The entrepreneur feels he must present a confident, unflappable face to the world, for fear that any expressed insecurity or doubt may cling to the business and weaken it.

Entrepreneurs often enjoy esteemed roles in the community. Everyone admires that they had a dream and acted on it. So it's hard for them to prick that balloon and admit when they feel alone, or scared, or confused. Entrepreneurs need to be able to let their hair down with people they trust. (I have interviewed many business owners for whom Entrepreneurs Organization [EO] fills that role.)

Likewise, the spouse too is unsure about whom she can entrust with her doubts. She may also be tormented about what to tell the children when times are rough. Who better than the spouses of other entrepreneurs can understand the insecurities she lives with?

5} Take the long view. The crisis of the moment is probably just a speed bump. Don't feed one another's panic or swerve from fretting over a discrete setback to questioning whether the business was worth starting in the first place. Accept that you are both in for a long series of disappointments mixed with the occasional triumph, and pace yourselves emotionally. A therapist can be helpful in working through the gnarly issues that inevitably arise.

This is of course much easier said than done. My dynamic with Gary was typical for entrepreneurs and their spouses: business hurdles that he took in stride had me hanging from the chandelier. As Gary once told me, business is all about solving problems. The seriousness and endless nature of Gary's business challenges unnerved me for many years. I waited impatiently for the seas to calm. Occasionally they did—for a day or two. It took a couple of decades, but I've finally learned to savor the wins and not freak out about the losses.

“Just because you're not business partners doesn't mean you can't collaborate on a venture that matters to you both.”

6} Work together for a cause. Just because you're not business partners doesn't mean you can't collaborate on a venture that matters to you both. Organize a fundraiser, launch a nonprofit, identify opportunities for the company to help in the community. Look for creative ways to mesh your interests and talents. You'll come to appreciate one another's talents afresh.

Think of these efforts not as an attempt at work-life “balance” but rather as a way to achieve work-life “integration”. Gary and I, for example, worked with a local nonprofit to create a loan fund for New Hampshire dairy farmers to convert to organic. Together, we support certain nonprofits with ideas and donations.

Date night and shared hobbies are important, but they don't blur the work-life divide. By using her business skills in a way that helps the community, the entrepreneur can deepen her relationship with her spouse as they work together on a cause of mutual concern. And that passion for giving back can translate into greater passion for one another.

7} Be a sounding board for each other. The spouse is not obligated to sit through a constant terrifying litany of business woes. But the entrepreneur needs someone to talk to. He will appreciate a sympathetic ear and—even better—advice from a person who is intimately familiar with his personality, strengths and weaknesses. The spouse should know enough about the company to offer informed opinions. And she shouldn't be afraid to push back—the entrepreneur gets enough automatic agreement from employees eager to please the boss.

Likewise, though the entrepreneur may think the spouse's work or personal issues are not as critical and pressing as what's happening in the business—they in fact are, to her. He needs to listen attentively, with a sympathetic ear, and offer solutions when appropriate.

The only caveat to this "Rule" is that since the family's financial stability is usually tied to the fate of the business, the entrepreneur, in particular, must resist dumping all his worries on his mate. He must carefully consider what and how much bad news to share with his spouse, and the spouse needs a pretty well-honed sense of just how much she can tolerate.

For years I put the brakes on how much Gary told me—for both of our sakes. Bad business news was tough for me to listen to calmly. I wanted to listen to a financial report the way I watched *The Shining*—running out of the room during particularly terrifying scenes. As for Gary, he had enough troubles at work; he didn't need my alarm bells ringing in his ears at the same time.

So eventually Gary and I consciously adopted the wisdom of the three wise monkeys: he spoke no evil, and I saw and heard none, either. This highly controlled flow of information was probably necessary for our emotional survival, but it became a debt against our intimacy, since we shouldered our burdens alone. I don't recommend it for the long term. But during the start-up years, it may be a good strategy. If the spouse has a low tolerance for the perpetual crises that are part of building companies, the entrepreneur should find a different pair of ears—attached to someone who won't be left trembling when the conversation is over. (See “Befriend other company-building families,” above.)

These days, now that the roof over our head is secure, I am able to listen to and give feedback on pretty much any business matter that arises. I think it's useful for Gary, and it certainly helps us stay connected.

8} **Take vacations, even if it's going to take six months or a year to pay off the**

Visa bill. Often this is one of the first “extras” to be sacrificed, especially during the start-up years. The family can't afford it financially, and the entrepreneur can't afford to leave her business, mentally or physically. Certainly there are small, inexpensive ways to share meaningful moments, and I encourage everyone to periodically leave the office before the sun goes down and spend an hour taking a walk with your spouse or teaching your daughter to ride a bike.

But when families discuss what to sacrifice due to limitations on time and/or money, I think vacations should be off the table. Getting away from it all—or even better, getting away to someplace new and exciting—is not only refreshing. It can also be life altering.

Even a little time away—spent together, in a different locale—can produce important memories, and sometimes life-changing experiences, far out of proportion to the amount of time set aside. You don't need to go far, or for long. Make economies elsewhere. Take those trips.

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9 } Consciously spend time on your important relationships. It sounds so obvious, doesn't it? But it's easy to sacrifice that personal time when you are preoccupied by company-building.

Nothing good or lasting in a business happens by accident. That is also true for families. You don't need the domestic version of a business plan, but vague promises to make more time for each other just aren't good enough. Entrepreneurs and spouses must make a real commitment, and, as in business, they have to execute.

I often advise entrepreneurs to treat their spouses like their most important clients. Entrepreneurs win customers by offering not simple attention but true attentiveness. As a businessperson, I tell them, you are solicitous, observant, mindful, and aware—eager to both anticipate and fulfill a client's needs. Your spouse doesn't want to hear you all buttery on the phone with a client, only to then hang up and grump at her. You need to remember that she is your number-one life client and most important connection. Court her—with a thoughtful gift, a just-because hug, or morning coffee in bed. Make it clear you want to keep her business, too.

10 } Visit your spouse's universe, and ask him to visit yours. In many ways, the entrepreneur is fused with her business—her identity bound up in its fate. The spouse, too, cares deeply about the company. But it does not define him as it does the entrepreneur. He spends his days in other worlds, consumed by other matters. Talk to him about them. Better yet: join him at a

conference; read one of his students' papers; play audience while he rehearses a presentation; accompany him to the kitchen showroom and weigh in on tile- grout color. You'll understand him better. His busy-ness is your business, too.

This walking-a-mile-in-your-spouse's-shoes is critical to building empathy. Gary often invited me to Stonyfield board meetings, where I learned a lot about the company, and came to appreciate the amount he was coping with. I also saw him in a different light—as the boss. I'd look around and see all the lives—and families—that were dependent on the company thriving. It made Gary's extensive travel, weekend work, and high level of distraction more understandable, and acceptable. Likewise, Gary has come to some of my talks; he helps me with edits; I ask his advice about paint color (even though he's colorblind, he has strong opinions on the matter).

If you have children, this Rule applies to them too. Go to that soccer game, sure. But also make sure to spend unstructured time with your child. We've come to equate the witnessing of our children's athletic and other performances with good parenting. While it's important to show up for these things, they don't substitute for one on one, get-to-know-your-kid time. It might be sitting around watching a favorite TV show, shooting hoops in the driveway, or ten minutes chatting in the car on the way to practice. Just make sure he has your undivided attention—and that means that the smartphone is nowhere in sight (see item 2, above).

You might bring your child to work a couple times a year, even if it means taking him out of school. (Nicole Dawes, CEO of Late July, a manufacturer of organic cookies, chips, and crackers, has made business cards for her 8-year-old son. He gives them out at the company booth at trade shows, all the while extolling the virtues of Late July products to anyone who will listen.) Consider bringing your child on occasional business trips. Kids bask in the attention paid them by employees, and their own respect for you will swell as they watch other adults seek your direction and counsel. The knowledge that when Mom is gone she's not just gone—she's somewhere else doing something important—makes those frequent absences easier.

II } Establish systems. The entrepreneur uses systems and processes to run his company efficiently. Do the same thing at home to prevent his frequent absences and the company's erratic needs from pushing you into chaos. By creating shared calendars, holding regular family meetings, and tracking everyone's priorities so that—with time and money tight—the most important needs are met first, you can establish an island of relative stability in choppy seas.

We had a huge calendar in our mudroom, where we tried to scribble down everyone's obligations. We felt the disorder creep in when we failed to keep up with that calendar. Likewise, our sporadic family meetings were very useful in keeping us all in touch. Everyone was made to feel free to air their grievances, their expectations, and their requests. Sometimes the conversations started

awkwardly, but we always emerged feeling more at peace with one another. Some families make such meetings routine. In retrospect, I wish we had, too.

12 } Don't delay key life goals. The fact is, when you are building a business there is never a right time—for anything. There's no right time, because there's no time, and usually no money either. For having kids, buying a house, saving for retirement, taking a vacation—even getting a dog. Planning becomes difficult when income, if it exists at all, is insecure and savings are usually (to put it gently) unsubstantial. So an entrepreneurial life becomes all about postponing—“When we break even,” “When we get that contract,” “When we hire that salesperson,” ah yes, that's when our lives can move ahead.

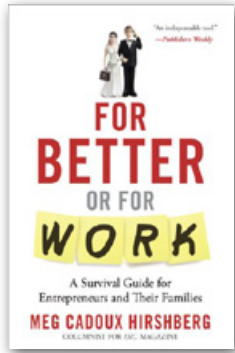
Only that day doesn't come because the business never grows up. It may reach a point where it no longer needs constant coddling. But a company is an evolving organism that constantly challenges its founder, sucking up attention and resources at every stage. If you allow a business, even a successful one, to dictate your life, you will always find reasons to delay making the big personal investments. Sure we could take out a mortgage but if we use that money to open a new branch it will mean more money down the pike to buy a larger house by which point it will be time to expand overseas ... and what's so bad about renting?

The inescapable fact is that while you are building (and building and sometimes rebuilding) a business, you are also composing a life. There are personal opportunity costs if the former activity causes you postpone important events in the latter. That is especially true if family and business are young at the same time. Put off having kids too long and you may end up with fewer than you wanted or none at all. Put off taking vacations and you won't create those memories and points of connection that glue a family together. Put off starting a college fund and risk informing your valedictorian that the Ivy League, alas, is not in the cards. Starving yourself in anticipation of a future opportunity to gorge is not necessarily a good strategy.

With apologies to John Lennon, life is what happens while you are busy making a five-year business plan. 📌



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Meg Cadoux Hirshberg is married to the founder of Stonyfield Yogurt and writes the “Balancing Acts” column in *Inc. magazine*. She is the author of *For Better or for Work: A Survival Guide for Entrepreneurs and Their Families* (Greenleaf Book Group; March 5, 2011).

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