

Meghan Swarhout

PharmD, MBA, BCPS



CEO of the Household—Stay-at-Home Dad

Meghan, a married young leader, outlines specific advice on how she and her husband are managing their life and family. She indicates it requires finding the right partner and believing in the inherent power you have to choose the life path that is best for you.

Meghan is currently Division Director, Ambulatory and Care Transitions, Department of Pharmacy, The Johns Hopkins Health System, Baltimore, Maryland; Residency Program Director, postgraduate year 1 and 2 (PGY1/PGY2) community health-system pharmacy administration residency; and Lecturer, Leadership and Management, University of Maryland School of Pharmacy. She received her PharmD (2009) from Ohio Northern University, Ada, Ohio and her MBA, Medical Services Management, from The Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, Johns Hopkins University. Meghan completed an ASHP-accredited PGY1/PGY2 health-system pharmacy administration residency at The Johns Hopkins Hospital.

***Meghan's advice is:* Communicate clearly, honestly, and often; create an accountability structure for your career and family; be clear about your priorities; and find joy and meaning in quiet, unassuming moments of life.**



Dear Colleague,

A few months after I started dating Joey, we attended a collegiate awards program together as fellow student leaders. I received unexpected recognition that evening and was asked to stay after the program to take some photos. I got caught up in the moment and conversations; more

time passed than I realized. As I finally wrapped up, I saw Joey quietly sitting in the back of the room with my purse and coat by his side. I complimented him on his purse and shoes style combo, sheepishly acknowledging my appreciation that he had patiently waited while holding my bag. He looked back with pride in his eyes and said, “I want to be the person holding your purse for the rest of your life.” It was my first glimpse of what having a supportive partner really meant.

In the 10+ years since that evening, we’ve gotten engaged, married, and started a family. We learned how to communicate better through a two-year, long-distance relationship during residency. He moved to Baltimore after I finished my residency so I could continue to pursue a position I’m passionate about, with an organization and team that make me excited to get up every morning. He has transitioned from teacher to at-home dad, or as he aptly titled his role, CEO of the Household. Our life decision to embrace less traditional gender dynamics in our household has been met primarily with support, sometimes with surprise, and occasionally with veiled or overt criticism. Making our partnership work and striving for the elusive work-life integration requires communication, accountability, a focus on priorities, and learning to live in the moment.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of success for interpersonal interactions in all settings, perhaps none more important than at home, especially for items of great significance such as discussing possible promotions and career changes that may involve a move, as well as items of smaller significance such as who is going to wash the dishes. Speaking of dishes, we don’t divide household responsibilities 50/50. I’d estimate I handle about 10 to 20% of household tasks (and that might be generous). We have to communicate how to best share the responsibilities, and I have learned that I need to be clear in communicating expectations. For example, he can’t read my mind about how to do my laundry. If I want him to wash some clothes on the delicate cycle and lay sweaters flat to dry, I need to be clear!

The big topics require more longitudinal discussions. Joey and I regularly discuss my career goals and how they align with our family goals. When I have been presented with a potential career opportunity at another organization, we have transparent conversations. I have happily chosen to pursue opportunities and promotions at the same institution through this point in my career, and regular discussions and sharing of goals prevent surprises and help us make mutually agreeable decisions as a team.

Like all relationships, Joey and I have disagreements and times when our behaviors fall short of each other’s expectations. This is where accountability becomes critical. For example, because it isn’t possible to get home at the same

time every night, it was frustrating for Joey to guess when I would be home, making it difficult to schedule dinner. He also needed breaks from toddler wrangling. The solution we found was to put a chalkboard on our kitchen wall where we write out our weekly plan, including my estimated arrival time. It creates shared accountability and doesn't keep my family guessing when I'll be home. Leaving the office at 5:00 p.m. every night isn't realistic, so I have one scheduled late night per week. It reduces the guilt of leaving at an earlier time on the other nights, and I can strategically plan to work on projects that need focused time during the one scheduled late night. We've learned it's definitely better to discuss accountability in a timely manner versus letting issues fester for too long.

I've spent more time than I should pursuing the unrealistic goal of perfection, and social media and societal norms further fuel these unattainable goals. Focusing on priorities helps reduce this noise and bring more meaning to our lives. My husband's top priority is the development and upbringing of our children, which means our house is dusty. I don't make birthday cakes from scratch, and I fall asleep without taking off my makeup. I've been encouraged by hearing from my role models that they outsource certain tasks like housecleaning. The need for outsourcing is different with one partner at home. Having an at-home spouse doesn't completely eliminate the need to consider what should be outsourced, and my husband and I both had to stop feeling guilty about hiring lawn services. We would rather spend our time together as a family on activities we enjoy versus mowing the lawn and raking leaves. Your house doesn't need to look like a spread from a magazine. Ice cream for dinner can be a fun treat when you forget to plan a meal. Some projects may be best left uncompleted (remember Stephen Covey's fourth quadrant).

When I returned from maternity leave after my first child, I quickly learned that I needed to be as productive as possible at work by focusing on priorities. That meant creating a better system to prioritize my to-do list, minimize unproductive time, and have a plan to manage my overflowing email inbox. I heard a productivity coach speak at a conference, and I asked my organization to support me working with the coach for a defined period. I outlined how the investment would benefit the organization, and my request was approved. The coach spent time observing my behaviors, providing honest feedback, and helping me implement a new task management system. It was well worth the time and money invested! If you feel like you are drowning, consider engaging an executive coach or productivity coach to help you refocus your priorities and maximize your effectiveness at work.

A key priority is making time for my relationship with Joey and ensuring care time for myself. We don't have immediate family close to us due to our decision to live out-of-state so I could pursue my career. We have learned that scheduling regular date nights is important, and we have to get creative with child care. We exchange babysitting nights with other parents and have found trusted babysitters through colleague recommendations (sometimes you can bribe a friend with a good bottle of wine). Make time for you, and let go of guilt. Work on a hobby, go to the spa, focus on a personal fitness plan, or indulge in your favorite guilty pleasure like a reality television show. This investment in *you* makes you happy, helps you take better care of others, and can enhance your productivity long term by taking time to decompress.

While writing a draft of this letter, my toddler asked me to play indoor bowling with water bottles and a rubber ball (try it. . . it's pretty fun). Did it put me off my timeline for task completion? Yes. Was it worth staying up later after he went to bed to enjoy the moment of play with him? *Absolutely*. Integration always requires decisions with trade-offs. Perfection is an illusion. *Enjoy the ordinary moments that make life special*. Create "no technology" time, such as at the dinner table and during set hours on the weekends. Shut off your email when you are out of the office.

I noted earlier that our more nontraditional gender roles are sometimes met with veiled or overt criticism. At first, we internalized these comments and didn't discuss them with each other or others. Holding in this frustration wasn't healthy. We've learned to assert ourselves more positively through the years. When someone asks Joey if he's babysitting, he proudly tells them that he's parenting. When someone asks when he's going back to work, he reminds them he works every day caring for our family. When someone asks me if I feel guilty making my husband do the housework, I tell them how proud I am to show my children that women can be senior leaders. It's not always easy, and you need a support system of people who understand and listen without judgment. Joey belongs to a national network of at-home dads. It's opened his eyes to a broader level of inclusivity, such as two-dad households, and reminds him he isn't alone. My next goal is that we stop referring to all daytime activities with the title of "Mommy and Me" and "Mom Playdates." It makes working mothers feel guilty that they can't participate and at-home fathers feel like they aren't included. Gender-neutral terms work well for all parents.

Choosing to have an at-home partner was the right decision for my family. There are many models that work, and the best model for you may be very different. You may choose to stay home, pause your career, and return to the

workplace at the time that is right for you. You may have a two-career household. You may choose to pursue job-sharing and part-time work to care for children or aging parents. You may choose not to have children and care for others in your family, your friends, or the community in important ways. We need to embrace all pathways and be role models for future generations by celebrating diverse life decisions.

Ultimately, the best piece of advice I can give you, albeit a little cheesy, is to live your life as a love letter—to your patients, your team, your community, your family, and yourself. Be patient and kind to yourself and others. Communicate clearly, honestly, and often; create an accountability structure for your career and family; be clear about your priorities; and find joy and meaning in quiet, unassuming moments of life. Let's all free ourselves of our self-inflicted guilt and express more gratitude for what is working well. Be selective in finding the right partner, and know the inherent power you have in choosing the life path that is best for you.

Let's continue to break down stereotypes and inappropriate and outdated social norms. I look forward to creating a future together where there is equal gender representation in the chief executive suites and in the home.

Kind regards,

Meghan