

PROBLEM SOLVING

Taking the road less travelled*Friday, July 30, 2010***SUSAN PINKER****Dear Susan,**

I work for a multinational, have been relocated twice, and have worked on three continents. This was great before my kids were born and when they were small. Now I am facing the choice to relocate again for a promotion or to stay in Canada in my current position, which I have had for four years. The new job would mean less time away from home; I now have to travel internationally three weeks out of four. But it would also mean moving the family again, this time to head office, where I started 15 years ago. The kids (one preteen, one 13) are fighting this idea. But my wife is rooting for the move as it would mean settling down. She wants to live closer to her family and to go back to work, and she can't work here. I'm undecided. Advice?

*- Torn***Dear Torn,**

Simplify this difficult decision by shifting two priorities to the top of your list: your wife's preferences and the impact of each job option on your long-term health.

Until now, your wife has put your career and the kids' needs first. Now it's her turn. And if there's anything you need more than a well-paying and challenging job, it's a solid marriage. (More on that in a moment.)

As for the effect of either job on your health, research gives a thumbs-down to the long-term effects of frequent international air travel. If you want to avoid stress-related problems such as heart disease, stroke and auto-immune disorders – not to mention the loneliness of the long-distance traveller – go for the job with fewer transcontinental trips.

Frequent air travel is unlike the other perks of upward mobility, which usually promotes health. The opportunity to eat freshly prepared meals, live in a nice neighbourhood, and exercise regularly in a pleasant, clean environment comes to mind. In contrast, frequent flying most often translates to stale air and food, increased stress, little exercise, and less privacy. Most importantly, it disrupts your natural sleep-wake rhythms, exerting long-term effects on your cognitive skills.

The evidence is pretty scary, especially for those who fly long distances in economy class. In his book on the physiological effects of stress, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky showed how frequent air travel boosts the body's secretion of glucocorticoids – chemicals automatically secreted in times of stress. We're not a nocturnal species, he notes, and working the night shift or repeatedly interrupting your natural sleep schedule to fly overnight provokes this stress response, no matter how many hours of sleep you try to get the following day.

One of effects of glucocorticoids is to shrink the hippocampus, a part of the brain that helps consolidate explicit memories. Do you remember where you stashed the USB key with the latest PowerPoint slides? How about the names of the people you'll be meeting an hour after you land at Heathrow? A healthy hippocampus might help.

Unfortunately, the more frequently you fly overnight, the more impaired your hippocampal-dependent memory. One 2002 study cited by Dr. Sapolsky, by University of Bristol neuroscientist Kei Cho, compared flight attendants who worked for two airlines. At one airline, crews had a 15-day break after each transcontinental flight. At the other airline, attendants got a five-day break. Employees had worked these schedules for more than five years. Controlling for flight lengths and time zones (neither group experienced more jet lag), Professor Cho found that airline No. 2's attendants had "impaired explicit memory, higher glucocorticoid levels, and a smaller temporal lobe [the part of the brain that contains the hippocampus]," Dr. Sapolsky noted.

"Atrophied" was the word used to describe the chronically jet-lagged hippocampus. Had the study measured the impact of such work schedules on the crews' marriages, there might have been some deterioration there, too.

Which brings me back to your wife. If she feels strongly about the issue, let her guide you on this one, as she is more likely to have everyone's – including your – best interests in mind. At least that's what a host of studies suggest.

In Canada, married men have life expectancies seven years longer than single men, reports Tara Parker-Pope in *For Better*, a new book about the science of marriage. The fate of unmarried men living elsewhere isn't rosy, either. In northern Europe, for example,

being single in midlife boosts the risk of dementia, with higher mortality risks in almost every category (ranging from violent death to several forms of cancer).

Being happily married trumps most other factors when it comes to living a long, active and engaged life. And ultimately, that's what you're after, isn't it?

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*. Her blog on the science of human relationships can be found at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind>

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