

How Overworked Couples  
Can Beat Stress Together

# A SUPERCUPLE



# A SYNDROME

Wayne M. Sotile, Ph.D., and Mary O. Sotile, M.A.

# *Supercouple Syndrome*

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*To our daughters, Rebecca and Julia,  
For being sisters we admire,  
for blessing our lives with your presence,  
and for carrying on our family traditions as you blaze your own trails.  
Giving you each other is the best thing we ever did.*

# Preface

We are the new superheroes: a generation of men and women facing unprecedented changes and lofty expectations for fulfillment in three major arenas—family, work, and self. We push and challenge each other to get it all: success, health, and happiness. Compared to prior generations, we expect more. But, in the wake of the downsizing trend of the last decade, we also struggle more.

A new work ethic is emerging; one which calls for us to maintain flexibility, expect transition, redefine success, fight the right fight—and try to maintain reasonable balance between work, family, and personal life.

But we seldom meet a couple who reports a comfortable balance across their collective roles. That today's couples have achieved such a balance has become the 1990's version of the Beaver Cleaver family myth. With fewer than 15 percent of American households blessed with the luxury of an at-home spouse, how can a comfortable balance of roles exist? In truth, it can't. In facing our combination of roles, we have normalized workweeks of 85 to 110 hours.

So, we don't live in balance—we live the Big Life. Our expanded expectations and multiple roles lead us to become superpeople with exceptional coping strategies that keep us going despite our abnormal levels of stress, fatigue, and tension. We become experts at managing our responsibilities, but we remain rather inept at keeping our relationships alive. Indeed, the crunch of our “ready, set, go” lifestyles is hurting us at home and at work. The stresses that come with the juggling act we are living lead us to cope in ways that hurt relationships. This is what we call Supercouple Syndrome.

Couples who suffer from Supercouple Syndrome apply the same hard-charging traits that make them successful in the business world (being in control, staying competitive, striving for perfection, moving at a fast pace) to their relationships. This tactic makes their relationships burdensome. When our personal relationships suffer, we lose our stress stamina. We then burn out and drop out, both at home and at work. Some are doomed to the three Ds: drained, downsized and divorced.

## New Hope for Happily (Enough) Ever After

Our research suggests that a new set of realistic, optimistic possibilities exists for today's Dynamic Duos—couples who use their relationships as havens from outside demands, who create appropriate boundaries, take time out to have fun, and nurture their partners by noticing everyday accomplishments. Who are these couples? What makes them different from stressed-out couples? What are their secrets to carving out healthy relationships in a crazy world?

We've been focused on answering these questions for the past 20 years. Our work began at the Duke University Medical Center, continued at Wake Forest University's Bowman Gray School of Medicine, and culminated in our private practice of medical psychology

and marital/family therapy. We have personally counseled over 5,000 couples. Thousands more have attended our workshops and lectures. Collectively, we have had the privilege of spending nearly 60,000 hours with high-powered people who used their resources to create success in their work and in their personal lives.

The culmination of this research and counseling is the *BEating Stress Together (BEST)* Program, designed to help today's chronically crazed, superachieving couples. The BEST program shows you how to follow nine easy steps to change your relationship style; by applying BEST, even the most stressed-out supercouples can become Dynamic Duos.

The case examples throughout this book are drawn from our clinical experiences. Descriptions and incidental facts have been altered to protect the confidentiality of our clients.

# Acknowledgments

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## Chapter One

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# Two Incomes, No Sex

The trappings differ, but today's superachieving couples all have similar problems.

### The Victims: Karen and John

Karen sat on our couch, crying as she recited a litany of confusion about yet another failed romance. "It seems that my relationships all end within three years. The guy makes the proverbial 'I just need a little space' announcement, and I *know* the end just began.

"I tried as hard as I could with John. I don't understand why it didn't last. I guess the fact that I have two kids was more of a problem for him than I knew.

"But I'll tell you this: I know that I'll survive. I survived my divorce. I've survived my dad's death and my mother's moving in for six months and now living six blocks from me. I've survived living on about 40 percent as much money as I used to. I'll survive this, too."

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In a separate counseling session, John clarified: "As far as I'm concerned, the fact that Karen has two kids is a plus, not a problem. I love her kids.

"The problem is Karen; she's like a split personality. In some ways, she's the most generous person I know. She's always going out of her way to help others. But she is also the most competitive person I have ever met, and that's a real turn-off for me. She's competitive in a deceptive way. I mean, behind closed doors the woman acts like her life is a contest with everyone she has ever known. All she talks about is the flaws of her friends and relatives. And her stress is always the worst stress; her schedule is always the most hectic; her burdens are always the heaviest. It's a strange competition.

"Things were great for us during the first two years. But these past two years have been hell. I've tried to talk with her about this, but our talks end up sounding like a competition about who is less competitive. I'm fed up."

### The Strugglers: Bruce and Marsha Malcom

The Malcoms were married as they were zooming up their respective career ladders. Bruce had just made partner in his law firm, and Marsha was one step away from taking over her family's real estate business. By the time their second child was born eight years later, they truly seemed to be thriving. They enjoyed a collective yearly income of \$385,000. They showed mutual respect for each other's success and cooperated in orchestrating their 50-to-75-hour workweeks while sharing the responsibilities of parenting and running their home.

But beneath the surface things weren't so glowing. When they entered counseling, they had not had sex in over 18 months, osten-

sibly due to Marsha's mysterious loss of libido. "I don't know what happened," Bruce lamented. "We used to be such a hot couple. Given how lousy sex had been in each of our first marriages, passion was one of the big attractions for us. I don't know what in the hell is wrong with you!"

Marsha's response dripped with sarcasm. "I don't know, Bruce. Maybe what's wrong with me is that I'm tired of your telling me how I am supposed to live, spend money, drive, associate with my family, parent our kids, and respond to you in bed. You are *the* most controlling person I've ever been around."

Marsha had an endless list of complaints about Bruce. When she was driving, he offered helpful hints about which lanes of traffic would likely move the fastest. He also had the annoying habit of interrupting her during conversations. He finished Marsha's sentences, seemingly in an effort to move the conversation along and get to the point. He seemed unable to focus on one thing at a time. As he visited with his family over breakfast, he also reviewed his day's schedule while glancing at the newspaper and listening to the morning stock report.

Bruce responded to his wife's criticisms with his own searing observations. "Let's not pretend here. You aren't exactly Miss Mellow. You're never satisfied being where you are, no matter where you are. When you're home, you worry about the office. When you're at work, you agonize over what's happening at home. Yes, maybe I am a little controlling; maybe I do a lot of things at once; I admit it. But at least I'm available. You are gone most of the time. You pretend that you only work 45 hours per week, but, in truth, you never play! Between your work at work and your work at home—some of which, I swear, we could hire out—you are working your life and our marriage away."

## The Thrivers: Mike and Belle Milano

It was traumatic when, after six years of stellar performance as an investment banker, Mike was told that he no longer had a job. Downsizing led to outsourcing his department's functions, and he found himself out of work for the first time in his achievement-filled life. And it happened during his wife's self-imposed hiatus from her own career. Four years prior, Belle had decided to put her marketing career on hold to be an at-home mom to their infant son.

Faced with an uncertain financial future, the Milanos weighed their options. First, they considered scaling down their lifestyle. Maybe they should sell their relatively new house. But they rejected that notion. This was their home; the place where they wanted to raise their family. They committed themselves to keeping it. They discussed the possibility of Belle's returning to work, but decided to delay that move until their son entered first grade. They held steady in their faith that Mike would find new work. But they didn't anticipate that the job search would take the 14 months that it did. Nor did they anticipate Belle's second pregnancy and the health problems it caused. After three months of bed rest, she miscarried.

By the time Mike joined a private investment firm, the Milanos had depleted their savings and had borrowed \$20,000 from their parents. But they remained upbeat: "We faced this in the only way that made sense to us. I'm proud of Belle; she's a trooper who never stops fighting. I'm just sad about the baby and about the financial bind we are now in. Once I get solidly going in this new job, we'll try again to get pregnant. The money? Well, making money is my job. I've got a great opportunity with this new firm, and I plan to jump on it."

More than second-guessing their financial or family future, Belle worried about the effect that this career setback would have on Mike. She described her husband as a workaholic who had trouble

controlling his temper: "Mike has always believed that he succeeds only because he works harder than everyone around him. He has so little faith in his natural talents and abilities. He can't relax if he has work to do, and of course, there's always work to do.

"This is not the first time we've been through something like this. Mike started his last job six years ago, after some horrible years caused by the fact that he hated his prior job and stayed angry all the time. I'm afraid about what this will do to him . . . and to us. Sometimes it's hard for me. I get tired of Mike's being so preoccupied and grouchy. So often, he's home, but he's not really relaxed.

"But, you know, I believe he does the best that he can. He's a good father, and he loves me with devotion. Plus, we still have more than our share of fun, at least compared to most couples I know. Thank God we committed ourselves to keeping our Tuesday-night-is-play-night rule sacred. We started that right before he quit his last job. We had it out then. He was working over 90 hours a week and was angry all the time. I told Mike then that I wouldn't stay married to him if he got lost in his workaholism and anger. And I refused to get pregnant until he did something about it. So he did.

"He vowed to me then that he would at least learn to create periods of recess from work and that he would look into making a career move. He kept his word; he made the move to the bank. He loved working there. Now this.

"But, I swear, I think those Tuesday night recesses from all of our worries and working keep us alive. I know that we'll make it; we've survived hard stuff before."

## Who Are These People?

In different ways, these couples epitomize the new normal. They are *superouples*—juggling multiple roles, managing complex fami-



lies, and enduring incessant stress. In short, they are living the Big Life.

In adapting to the Big Life, we have become a society of exceptional copers, high-powered people who employ some combination of coping strategies that keep us going despite our abnormal levels of stress, fatigue, and tension. Stereotypical superachiever men and women hold down pressure-cooker jobs and exude an intimidating presence. But no matter what their occupations, if they endure and acclimate to ever increasing levels of stress, they're high powered.

Karen is surviving her divorce, single parenting, her father's death, her own multiple roles, and the end of a series of important romances.

Bruce and Marsha are juggling two demanding careers while parenting their two children and struggling with each other. Like many superachievers, they find it hard to find time for each other; and consequently, their romantic life has suffered. These end up being TINS couples—*Two Incomes, No Sex*.

Mike and Belle are battling the three Ds that plague so many couples today: They get *downsized* at work; *drained* by their Big Life; and threatened with *divorce*. But the Milanos are winning this battle. Despite their financial strains, their career dramas, Mike's temper and workaholism, and their health scares and grief over Belle's miscarriage, they are trying to keep their love alive.

These stories depict most modern couples. We are a culture of stress-hardy copers. That's the good news. The bad news? Our methods for managing ourselves in the Big Life can kill our relationships.

Superachievers are able to do more, manage more, endure more, and achieve more than most people. They are able to deny themselves to get their work done—be it work at the office, the work of taking care of loved ones, or both. But when one or both partners lock into a superachiever coping style, they begin to suffer from