

Talking to your partner about work can make it more meaningful

How shared reality with partners at home can affect how you feel about the meaning of your work.



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We spend an average 90,000 hours at work throughout our lifetimes. So it's unsurprising that

many of us seek deeper meaning in our work: we want to feel it has a positive and significant impact.

Yet, on average, work is roughly [half as meaningful](#) as we would like it to be, and this can undermine our broader sense of meaning in life.

One reason for this divide is that we focus almost exclusively on finding meaning *inside* our organization. We believe all will be well if we collaborate effectively with teammates, if we have the right manager or if our organization has the right culture.

But, in fact, [as our research shows](#), our relationships *outside* of work can spill over into the workplace, influencing the meaning we find in our work environment.

Creating a shared reality

Imagine you have taken on a new project at work. At some point, you get stuck and aren't sure how to move forward. You might run some ideas by the person you are closest to: your romantic partner. If you feel like your partner immediately "gets it" when you tell them about work things — anything from team dynamics to career goals — you likely have what researchers call "[shared reality](#)," the experience of sharing the same thoughts and feelings with another person about the world. Research has shown that shared reality is an important part of relationships, contributing to feelings of closeness, support and commitment.

What we, along with our co-authors Amanda L. Forest and John E. Lydon, wanted to know was whether creating shared reality at home, in conversations with your romantic partner, could affect how you feel about the meaning of your work.

Weathering the pandemic with shared reality

In one study, we recruited 155 couples to complete surveys during the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, six months apart. One member of the couple had to be a frontline healthcare worker directly exposed to COVID-positive patients, and their partner could not work in healthcare.

At these two timepoints, healthcare workers rated their sense of shared reality with their partner since the onset of the pandemic. For example, they were asked: "To what extent do you typically share the same thoughts and feelings about things?" and "To what extent do you often develop a joint perspective through your discussions?"

We found that employees who felt more shared reality with their romantic partners came to feel less uncertain about their work environment over time and, in turn, came to find their work more meaningful. Further, this effect was not explained by relationship satisfaction (how happy people felt in their relationship) — it was specifically driven by shared reality.

This effect is remarkable given what the healthcare workers were facing at the time. While the pandemic was a period of great uncertainty for society as a whole, frontline healthcare workers, in particular, experienced increased levels of stress. Yet, amid these overwhelming challenges, many romantic partners helped frontline workers make sense of their experiences by creating a sense of certainty through shared reality.

Here, healthy relationships were able to influence how individuals experienced their lives away from home and, crucially, they transferred meaning. This research speaks to the power of our romantic partnerships in influencing how we experience the world beyond the walls of our homes.

Even for those of us with less stressful day jobs, the extent to which you feel that you and your partner share thoughts and feelings about your work environment (coworker dynamics, management styles, career goals), the more certain you may feel about how you interpret your work (how to approach a new project, how to delegate different tasks). As a result, you may find your work to be more meaningful.

Tips to help build shared reality with your partner

Shared reality is worth cultivating for your relationship's sake, but it could also be something to focus on if you want to boost your sense of meaning at work.

1. **Communicate:** Have conversations about your workdays. Research shows that, through these discussions, partners can develop a joint perspective and a shared lens through which they view the world. Over time, you may even begin to develop your own shared language with your partner about your work.
2. **Participate in joint activities:** Make it a habit of doing a simple activity together, like cooking dinner, once a week. Over time, these joint activities will help you develop ways of thinking, behaving and interacting that are unique to your relationship, which is key to experiencing a shared reality.
3. **Align on past and future:** Reminiscing about shared memories and aligning your

future goals can deepen your shared reality. By aligning on who we were and who we will become, you and your partner will start to see yourself as one, achieving the deepest form of shared reality.

The effects of shared reality with a romantic partner aren't just limited to the relationship itself — they have profound implications for how we experience our work. By aligning on how we see the world with those closest to us, we can create a sense of meaning that transcends the daily grind.

READ ALSO: [Shared reality in romantic relationships reduces uncertainty and boosts meaning in life, study finds](#)



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