**THE WHO-DOES-WHAT EXERCISE**

We all play different roles or parts in our relationships, which consist of the tasks or activities that keep those relationships functioning over time. Some roles are external in nature—tied to physical, material, or tangible activities—e.g., grasscutter, cook, CFO.[[1]](#footnote-1) Others are internal and maintain the emotional, psychological, or energetic aspects of relationships, e.g., initiator, dissenter, motivator, feeler, analyzer.[[2]](#footnote-2)

* All relationships—personal *and* professional—not only have roles: They need roles to function.
* Roles are *not* who we are, *not* immutable identities. Instead, they are the tasks and responsibilities we assume and perform in relationships. In committed romantic ones, how roles get distributed, who occupies them, and how fully or not they are occupied depends on many factors, e.g., preferences, habits, social, religious, or familial norms, happenstance.
* Problems arise when one person *over*-occupies or *under*-occupies a role(s), or when role distribution—and, therefore, task sharing—is inequitable or otherwise unsustainable.

It’s not unusual for one parent to assume more external and internal household and childcare roles than the other. If decided jointly, equitably, or willingly, that scenario works well. However, because parenthood includes many *new* tasks and functions, and because their distribution isn’t always a conscious or negotiated process, the division of labor in the home is a battlefield for many new parents, especially heterosexual ones. For example, sometimes a stay-at-home parent is presumed and expected to be available for childcare and household tasks 24/7, while the parent that works outside the home views the hours they devote to their paid position as mandatory, while time spent on home-duties seem more optional, negotiable, or dismissible. In other instances, both parents work outside the home, yet one is the go-to parent, called upon during child-related emergencies, illnesses, appointments, and errands. In this scenario, unspoken or unconscious influences—such as traditional gender roles, assumptions about whose job or career is more important, or fears about your own or your spouse’s skillfulness as a parent—guide who occupies roles and how much they occupy them. In these scenarios, resentment, dissatisfaction, or other negative feelings impact individual and relationship fulfillment.

In *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, psychologist John Gottman offers an exercise based on typical household tasks. What follows is a significantly expanded version of that exercise, tailored to new parents, and combines the scope of existing household roles and tasks with the many new ones that arrive with a baby. Please note that quite a few tasks, e.g., replenishing baby diapers, are ongoing and repeat often. So, in practical terms, some functions require significantly more time, vigilance, and effort than others. Taking those factors into consideration will deepen your understanding of what it means to agree to, be expected to, or expect your spouse to take on roles and responsibilities.

Warning: The list of tasks that follows is long, which can be daunting to evaluate. If you find yourself checking out midlist or overwhelmed by just the prospect of starting this exercise, please take a few deep breaths to ground yourself. Consider doing this exercise in small chunks, e.g., pause, get up, and stretch after evaluating five or ten tasks, or complete this exercise over the span of multiple sittings.

**Guidelines for *The Who-Does-What Exercise*:**

* Complete this exercise individually (i.e., separate from your spouse).

* Mark the checkbox on the left for duties that currently are, or likely to become, topics of negative conflict.
* In the “Now” box, use initials to approximate *your* perception of the *current* distribution of labor, e.g., 100% JB; or 75% JB/25% RB; or even 75% JB/25% no one. If you are an expecting parent, fill out the “Ideal” box for baby-related tasks. You can complete the “Now” box after your baby is a few months old and compare it to the ideal scenario you imagined.
* In the “Ideal” box note your *preferred* division of labor, with a view to satisfying not only yourself, but also what you believe most benefits your relationship and family.
* In “Notes,” explain how your Ideal scenario will better serve you, your relationship, or your family than what you wrote for “Now.” Do your best to avoid communication toxins in your notes: e.g., disrespect, blame, criticism, or defensiveness and resist using absolutes and rigid commands, such as “always,” “never,” “should,” “have to,” “must,” “supposed to” and the like.

e.g., Grocery shopping Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

* Share and discuss your “results” with your spouse from a place of genuine curiosity and openness, especially when it comes to the ways in which your responses differ. The goal is *not* to agree; it’s to better understand your partner’s perspective, which provides a foundation for future discernment, negotiation, and compromise.

* + If you have *very* different perspectives on who does what or your ideal scenarios, try open-ended questions:
    - What do you think accounts for our differences in perception?
    - How do you think we can better understand each other’s views on who does what?
    - Given that we disagree, and both believe in the validity of our own perspectives and experiences, how can we compromise from a place of choice so that neither of us resents or regrets the outcome?
    - How might you be willing to shift to better understand my view (and vice-versa)?
  + Imagine that, together, you’ve been charged with adjusting your housework and childcare roles—and the tasks associated with them—to better manifest the relationship and family you most desire. You have an opportunity, indeed responsibility, to collaborate to create a new vision of your roles that you can both live with and abide by intentionally and willingly, at least until those roles get renegotiated again. ☺

**General Household Duties:**

Some of what follows is scheduled differently in different households, e.g., you might address financial planning monthly, annually, or on an *ad hoc* basis; some of you might take daily medications, while others use prescriptions solely in the event of serious illness. Feel free to add a task currently listed as Daily… to Annually, etc.

Items in red often tap into emotional or invisible labor. If that’s true for you, please mention how so in Notes. NB: *Other* tasks than those in red might spark invisible or emotional labor for you so please say so in “Notes,” e.g., the formula you first chose upset baby’s tummy so researching and trying new formulas ensued, which creates invisible labor. Plus, tracking your baby’s discomfort and trying to ensure their digestion is settled taps emotional labor.

Please indicate “N/A” in Notes for tasks that don’t apply to your household (or skip them altogether) and please add tasks not on this list in the blank boxes near the end of each section. Grey boxes expand as you type in them.

**Daily - Weekly - Biweekly tasks:**

Create/update grocery list Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Shop for groceries Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Put away groceries Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Sort clothes for dry cleaning Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take clothes to dry cleaner Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Get clothes from cleaner Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Oversee relationship messages: Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., phone messages, texts, emails, mail from friends/family including invitations to social events.

Respond to those messages Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Gas up car(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Plan meals Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Cook meals Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Set the table Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean up after meals Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean the kitchen Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Load dishwasher Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Run dishwasher Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Unload dishwasher Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean bathroom(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Gather/sort clothes for laundry Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Spot-stain laundry Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Wash & dry laundry Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Fold laundry Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Put away laundry Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Launder bedding/towels Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Put out fresh towels Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Dust Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Sweep/vacuum Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Tidying up in other ways Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., folding throw blankets on your couch, putting away the backgammon set.

Make bed(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Oversee housecleaner Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

If you hire someone to clean your home regularly or even just every once in a while, please indicate task

distribution in terms of communication with, oversight, and payment of that person/people.

Turn off lights at night Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Set/reset thermostat Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace empty TP roll(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace paper towels Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Gather household trash Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take out trash Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Gather household recycling Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take out recycling Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take trash cans to curb Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Return cans from curb Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Oversee composting Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Get/gather mail Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Sort incoming mail Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Review/read incoming mail Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track petfood and pet supplies Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Purchase petfood and supplies Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Feed pet(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Houseplant care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track relationship care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Plan dates Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Plan outings/weekends Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Make plans with friends Now:       Ideal:       Notes:        
Make plans with family Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

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      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Use the blank boxes above to add daily, weekly, or biweekly tasks not listed.

**Monthly - Quarterly tasks:**

Handwash select items Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Iron Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Service the car(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Shop for new clothes/shoes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replenish toiletries Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Order medications Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Pick up medications Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Order vitamins Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

General pet(s) care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track expenses/budget Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track savings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Review bills for accuracy Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Pay bills Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Balance checkbook(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Additional banking Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

General correspondence Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Prep packages for delivery Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Mail/send packages Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Change light bulbs Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Purchase light bulbs Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Change air filters Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Purchase air filters Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Perform yard/garden work Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Gardener Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

If you hire someone to maintain your garden regularly or just every once in a while, please indicate task

distribution in terms of communication with and payment of that person/people.

Clean outdoor furnishings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., clean the BBQ, wipe down patio furniture, bring out and then put away outdoor cushions.

Clean windows - interior Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Schedule car maintenance Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

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      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Use the blank boxes above to add monthly and quarterly tasks not listed.

**Biannual – Annual tasks:**

Prep tax materials Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Oversee tax return prep Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Consult with accountant Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Financial planning Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Book regular dental care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Book regular medical care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Deep clean pantry Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Assemble furnishings/items Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Deep clean fridge Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Thaw and clean freezer Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Organize cabinets/closets Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Wash windows - exterior Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace smoke alarm batteries Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Book vet appointments Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take pet(s) to appointments Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

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      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Use the blank boxes above to add biannual and annual tasks not listed.

***Ad-hoc* tasks (as needed)**

Respond to incoming mail Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Prepare/stamp outgoing mail Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Drop outgoing mail in mailbox Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Create budget Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Review household costs Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., review subscriptions and revise as needed such as online music, online storage, internet/cable plan.

Dispose of worn-out items Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Dispose of expired items Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., food in fridge, freezer, and pantry, and over-the-counter meds.

Research new furnishings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy furniture & furnishings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research appliances Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy appliances Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy other big stuff (e.g., car) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research advisors (tax, legal…) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Select advisors (tax, legal…) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Meet with advisors (e.g., legal) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Pick up medications for illness Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Emergency pet(s) care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track friends/family birthdays Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track other friend/family events Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Calendar social plans Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy gifts for friends/family Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Wrap gifts Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Write cards for gifts Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Perform home repairs Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Coordinate repairmen Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research vacations Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Decide on vacations Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Book vacations Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Pack for short outings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Pack for vacations Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Unpack after outings/trips Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Arrange rides to airport, train Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Arrange airport, train pickups Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Plan (for) holidays Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Decorate for holidays Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Prep food on holidays Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Serve food on holidays Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean up on holidays Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Invite friends/fam to events Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Initiate lovemaking Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Initiate relationship talks Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Sew/mend Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Prepare for guests Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean up after guests Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Prepare for parties Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean up after parties Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

File/store important docs Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

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      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Use the blank boxes above to add *ad hoc* tasks not listed. \*F&F = friends & family

**Infant & Childcare Tasks:**

Not all new parents perform all these tasks, and some have resources to outsource, so only check items relevant to *your* family.

Design baby’s room/space Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Decorate baby’s room/space Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Select baby furnishings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy baby furnishings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Assemble furnishings Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Make home baby-safe/friendly Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research gear (e.g., stroller) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Select baby gear Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy baby gear Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Read baby gear directions Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Assemble baby gear Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Dispose of outgrown gear Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace with new gear Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Install car-seat(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track car-seat upgrades Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., when to change rear-facing to front-facing, when to upgrade to new car-seat.

Change car-seat direction Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Complete hospital forms (birth) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

File birth certificate Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Create birth announcement Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Compile announcement list Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Distribute announcement Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Add baby to insurance(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy baby clothes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Organize baby clothes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy baby blankets/towels Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy crib bedding Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Organize bedding/towels Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Set aside outgrown clothes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Give away outgrown clothes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research baby products Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

e.g., diapers, wipes, diaper pail, baby salves, teething-pain options.

Select products Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Evaluate product efficacy/safety Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy products Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace wipes when empty Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Dispose of full diaper pail liner Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace diaper pail liner Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replenish diaper supply Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace salves/creams Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Organize baby products Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Select baby toys/books Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy baby toys/books Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replace baby toys/books Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Read to/play with baby Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Plan friend/family visits Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Write/send thank you notes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Change diapers-daytime Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Change diapers-nighttime Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Launder baby clothes Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Launder baby bedding Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Change baby bedding Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean baby’s room (general) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean *ad hoc*, e.g., spit up Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Put away laundered items Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Select baby’s outfit(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Change the baby’s outfit Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Place clothes in hamper Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Breastfeed baby Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research lactation support Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Schedule lactation support Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Select baby formula Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Buy baby formula Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Replenish baby formula Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Daytime bottle-feeding Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Nighttime bottle-feeding Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Wash/sterilize baby bottles Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Clean breast pump parts Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Organize breastmilk storage Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track frozen breastmilk (if any) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Burp baby-daytime Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Burp baby-nighttime Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Soothe upset baby early am Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Soothe upset baby mid-am Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Soothe upset baby early pm Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Soothe upset baby mid-pm Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Soothe upset baby late-pm Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Soothe upset baby overnight Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Early am infant/baby care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Midday infant/baby care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Evening infant/baby care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Late night infant/baby care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Overnight infant/baby care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Swaddle baby Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Oversee baby’s naps Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track baby’s naps Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Oversee baby’s bedtime Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track baby’s sleep cycle Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Bathe baby Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research baby’s doctor(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Interview baby’s doctor(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Placement of monitor/baby-cam Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Charge baby monitor(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track doctor appt schedule Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Book doctor appointments Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take baby to doctor(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Follow-up w/ doc, if needed Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Serve as contact for doctor(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Emergency/ill baby care Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track baby milestones Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Keep/update baby book Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research baby caregiver(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Check caregiver reference(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Interview caregiver(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Hire caregiver(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Schedule caregiver(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Supervise caregiver(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Pay caregiver(s) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research baby class(es) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Sign up/pay for baby class(es) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Attend baby class(es) Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Obtain baby-related advice Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Initiate baby chats w/ spouse Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Test out baby advice Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Research baby CPR course Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Sign up for baby CPR course Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Take baby CPR course Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track general baby needs Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

Track general baby wellbeing Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

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      Now:       Ideal:       Notes:

1. Invisible labor usually consists of external tasks executed out of your spouse’s sightline or without their knowledge, awareness, or curiosity about your efforts, e.g., setting up and tracking auto-delivery for diapers and other supplies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Emotional labor dovetails with internal roles, though sometimes includes external ones as well, e.g., tracking your baby’s milestones can be tangible insofar as you record them or communicate them to your pediatrician, yet also emotional in that you remain internally vigilant about your child’s developmental changes *or* lack thereof with a view to ensuring your baby is healthy and on track with other kids their age. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)