

The Perfect Actuarial Spouse Eighth Wonder of the World

Actuaries have a tough job, but so do their spouses. Alas, the exam syllabus doesn't have a paper describing how an actuary should select a spouse. So I'm filling the void by researching, writing, and publishing this article. What traits should an actuarial spouse have? The top actuarial spouses play the following roles:

First, they must be part therapist and be very supportive. They need to support their actuaries in their daily endeavors and be prepared to deal with the wide range of emotions their actuaries exhibit. Spouses will have to "talk their actuaries off of a ledge" when the Berquist/Sherman paper remains a mystery and try to bring them back to a rational earth when they finally get the sample exams right and can't contain themselves.

Second, they need specialized knowledge of the exam process, syllabus, and authors so when their actuaries wail that they don't understand the Glenn Meyers paper, they can respond, "Don't worry, honey; neither does anybody else!" They also need to realize that if their actuaries spend a solid month studying for Part 7 and reading Feldblum, it doesn't mean they're slackers. They need to avoid opening their actuaries' exam results and asking their Part 9 candidates, "How high does the grade number need to be in order to pass?"

Third, they need the ability to protect their studying actuaries and be able to organize or cancel social events quickly to match their actuaries' moods. Actuarial spouses need to realize that they'll be sleeping with someone different every night as their actuaries' moods, study progress, and confidence levels change during the course of exam study. The boldest and brightest actuarial spouses will take a chair, a coat, the Halloween candy, and their favorite beverage out to the front porch to eliminate the normal noise of ringing of doorbells on Halloween, giving their actuaries "the advantage they need."

Fourth, they need a head for numbers, an overview of



actuarial concepts, and presentation skills. This befuddles many actuarial spouses.

I've been a reserving actuary for most of my career. Often, when my wife and I go to the movies to see a less popular film, we play the game of projecting CBNS's, or Coming But Not Seated. In other words, how many people will be showing up late? Through this process, she now realizes the thrill of making a projection and the shameful feeling of having her ultimate blown 10 minutes after she projects it.

Over the years, actuarial spouses will come to realize

that good actuarial presentations are almost an oxymoron, truly the exception rather than the rule. To top it all off, regardless of the quality of the actuarial presentation given, an almost universal trademark of an actuarial presentation is to have "busy" slides with a font so small that the audience can't read them. Actuarial spouses who can retrain their actuaries by "spending some quality time with them, showing interest, and making a few small changes here and there in the presentation" are valuable indeed.

Even the best actuarial spouses become frustrated when they don't understand why many actuarial exhibits are shown in a triangular form rather than in traditional row-and-column format. The frustration increases as the actuary explains that the triangular exhibits can represent either incremental experience, cumulative experience, or age-to-age factors.

The actuarial use of the word *sigma* can be particularly annoying since it can mean either sum or standard deviation, important but different components of the actuarial vernacular. Learning the meaning of other actuarial terms can be daunting but necessary. My actuarial spouse knows the difference among mean, standard deviation, variance,

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median, and mode. I quiz her every once in a while to make sure she still knows those things.

Actuarial spouses must be tolerant and able to hear variations on the same themes *over and over* again from their actuaries and still remain interested and inquisitive. Face it, folks, we tell the same story at least 80 percent of the time:

■ Numbers need to be analyzed. They get delivered to the actuary later than promised.

■ The data, when it finally arrives, is of poor quality. Many inconsistencies are obvious after a cursory review.

■ After adjustments, the numbers still make no sense. Innumerable hours are spent getting numbers into and out of Excel spreadsheets.

■ The phone rings. It's the ultimate customer who needs the analysis. Why can't the completed analysis be delivered early?

■ A set of "reasonable adjustments" is made to the data. It now makes sense.

■ There are two different types of ultimate customers—those who are actuarially clueless (their eyes glaze over, and, as long as exhibits summarizing the analysis are given, they have no problems) and "armchair actuaries" who'd like to debate all the assumptions and any of the factors the actuary selects.

■ The numbers are presented to the ultimate customer; his only comment is that the numbers and analysis make no sense.

Actuarial spouses need to be compassionate cheerleaders/ER nurses who can "pull the thorn from the lion's paw" and nurse their actuaries back to health after one of a number of actuarial setbacks knocks them for a loop.

After laying out all these criteria of the perfect actuarial spouse, does any mortal meet all of these expectations?

The good news is that I know one person who does. The bad news is that I've been married to her for the past 26 years and have no intention of giving her up. ●

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