



Couples, Sex, and Money

The Motley Fool

By Elizabeth Brokamp

Let's face it: Most couples do not enjoy talking about budgeting or saving. It's not great party conversation, animated water cooler talk, or even the controversial stuff that makes for a good joke. It is decidedly unsexy.

Take the statistics on marital discord. The No. 1 cause of arguments with your hunk o' burning love? You guessed it: money.

Unlike on *Desperate Housewives*, where every conflict leads to acrobatic sex, fights over household expenses, bills, money styles, money mismanagement, shopping, splurges, and irresponsibility can get ugly. Not exactly wine and roses or a "Come hither" look.

We've all heard that, of course, and we've gone a round or two arguing with our own partners, yet the statistic hasn't changed. Just knowing that money is a huge problem doesn't solve the problem. So what's a couple to do?

First and foremost, you need to [create financial ground rules](#) as a couple. Not the, "OK, so just do everything I say and we'll be fine," kind of ground rules. The kind that realistically address your own financial shortcomings, anticipate conflict, and encourage communication.

That's easier said than done, of course. But try using these strategies for turning around your household money conflicts. They're sure to help you [keep the home fires burning](#), while putting out financial blazes.

Take a multimedia approach. Just as email has allowed you to keep in touch with old college friends you would never otherwise contact, allow it to revolutionize money conversations with your spouse. Giving each other time to read, reflect, and respond (rather than immediately flaring up over his raised eyebrow or her snippy tone) can create just the right amount of distance for handling this conflict-laden topic.

Setting up your budget on Quicken and synching it to your bank account and credit cards is another way to let technology work for you. It's hard to argue with the numbers, and automatic updates prevent a lag due to disorganization.

Work with one another's money personalities. When my husband and I met, our money personalities couldn't have been more different. At 24, Robert was already saving for retirement; I was eating ramen noodles and paying off a credit card. It was important for each of us to recognize our own strengths and weaknesses, and work together to develop a joint style. I recognize now that, with three kids and a mortgage, we need a hefty amount of savings. Robert concedes that taking a family vacation can be a fun splurge, although he still argues for staying in a tent.



Take mutual responsibility. It's easy to play the blame game when it comes to money. What's harder is to look at how each of you contributed to the financial pickle you're in. Maybe he loves picking up the bar tab for his friends, but remember the \$150 you spent getting your hair highlighted at the spa? What behaviors do each of you practice that make honest communication about money difficult? Do you nag and harangue? Do you keep a mental list of your partner's financial transgressions ready to whip out at a moment's notice? Or perhaps you get stony-faced and refuse to listen.

Whatever your most negative reaction (and we all have 'em), recognizing that it contributes to the overall problems the two of you have is an important first step in fixing the problem.

Take breaks from the tension. Sometimes knowing when not to say anything is the best communication skill of all. Very few things in life, including most financial decisions, have to be decided within hours. Allowing yourselves time to cool off may actually speed up your decision-making process. Agree to talk again later when fiery tempers have died down.

Have a default plan. We've had our share of money disagreements over the years, but we have a backup plan to help us out of a true impasse. If we simply can't agree, we have decided to err on the side of prudence. For example, if one of us were arguing for a trip to Italy (me) and the other (Robert) thought it was too expensive, we'd default to not going. It means one person "loses," but at least the loss isn't also a hard financial blow.

After a little more time, we may decide to spend the money after all (who can stay away from a country that's known for romance, fresh pasta, good art, and fine wine?), but only when we've had time to talk and reach a true agreement.

Make a fresh start. Robert and I have had times when we've let our finances slide, failed to keep our monthly budgeting meetings, and spent more than we should have. To help us recover from these lapses and to encourage us to confront the problems, we've agreed to a no-fault zone. That means no going back through the financial statements pointing fingers or anguishing too much over spilt milk. Agree with your partner to a fresh start, starting now.

Of course, this won't work if one spouse is repeatedly guilty of draining the family's resources — and his or her partner's trust — in the process. If you or your spouse has a large-scale spending problem, skip right to getting professional help.

Don't get complacent about communication. It may be trite, but good communication has saved us time and time again, through sleepless nights with sick children all the way to negotiating what to do with a tax return check. The years you've been together may earn you stripes for longevity, but they don't mean that you get to quit working at improving the partnership.



Give yourselves the gift of education . Consider a subscription to our personal finance newsletter service, [Motley Fool GreenLight](#). Sharing new issues and other interesting articles with your spouse is a great way to start productive money conversations, and the discussion boards are an excellent place to go with money questions.

Know when to get outside help. Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you bump into the same old problems without making progress. Here are just a few of the scenarios in which you may want to call in an outsider.

Seek the advice of a [financial planner](#) if you want to:

[reduce your debt](#). Develop a family financial plan for the future that includes [retirement planning](#), saving for the kids' [college educations](#), and an [emergency fund](#). Have a third-party to help oversee your financial health.

Seek the help of a mental health therapist if you:

Whatever your money issues, resolve to face them today. Knowing you can count on your spouse isn't the flashy kind of sexy, but it's the sort of allure that lasts.

This article is adapted from the [Motley Fool GreenLight](#) "Money Answers" archive, which features more than 100 articles on personal finance topics from taxes to credit to beginning investing, organized by subject and life stage. For access to this content plus the current newsletter, back issues, members-only discussion boards, and advisor blogs, take a [free 30-day trial](#) to GreenLight today!

Fool contributor Elizabeth Brokamp writes a weekly column, [Ask Mrs. Riches](#), on money and relationships. Her charming other half is The Motley Fool's own Robert Brokamp (TMF Bro), editor of [Rule Your Retirement](#).

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