

4 Mistakes Couples Make When Discussing Money

Therapists share the secrets to a drama-free money chat.



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By [Catherine Pearson](#)

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I like talking to my husband about a lot of things, but money isn't one of them. Most of our conversations about spending go something like this: We lament our credit card balances. We grumble about child care costs. Then we retreat until the next bill arrives or tax season shines a bright, unsparing light on our finances — as it is [right now](#).

I take some comfort in knowing that we're not the only ones who stink at discussing money. [In one small study](#), married couples reported their money-related disagreements tended to be more intense than arguments about other topics, and were less likely to be resolved. [Other research suggests](#) that financial conflicts may be a stronger predictor of divorce than other types of disagreements.

“It’s really hard to feel comfortable starting these conversations,” said Jillian Knight, a licensed marriage and family therapist who specializes in [financial therapy](#), which combines financial advice with psychological support. “Because a lot of the time, people have the belief that you shouldn’t talk about money or that they’re not good with money.”

I chatted with Ms. Knight and other therapists who work with couples on money issues about some common communication missteps.

Mistake 1: Assuming you have the same values

We tend to internalize financial lessons from our families, said Lisa Marie Bobby, a licensed marriage and family therapist. But conflicts arise when romantic partners assume that their point of view is the only point of view instead of taking the time to explore each other’s financial stories, she said. “This leads to sometimes vicious fights, arguing over whose perspective is the ‘right’ one,” she said.

To better understand where your partner is coming from, start with a broad question like “What money lessons did you learn growing up?” recommended Stephanie Zepeda, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Houston. For instance, if your parent lost his or her job several times, you might have grown up believing that saving money is the ultimate priority. Or you might have come to think that it’s important to say yes to all of the experiences and luxuries you didn’t have as a child, she said.

Mistake 2: Not checking in

Often, one partner in a relationship becomes the default money manager, Ms. Knight said. While that works for many couples, she believes both partners should understand at least a few basics: How much money is coming in? How much money is going out? Where is the money and how can I access it if necessary? And what are our big financial goals?

Couples should schedule regular sit-downs or “money meetings” to briefly check in on how things are going and prepare for any big decisions or expenditures coming up. Do not attempt to discuss everything about your finances in one session; “that can be overwhelming,” Ms. Knight said. Instead, make financial communication a regular part of your relationship. And whenever your scheduled time comes — once a week is ideal — try to make sure you are both relatively relaxed and well-fed, she added.

Mistake 3: Letting difficult conversations fizzle

Because financial conversations can escalate into arguments, couples sometimes — wisely — drop the subject to decompress, said LaQueshia Clemons, a licensed clinical social worker in Middletown, Conn.

But instead of intentionally returning to the topic — perhaps a debate about spending versus saving — later, they ignore it until the issue comes up again. “It becomes this circle that couples sometimes get stuck in,” she said. So it is essential that you loop back afterward, ideally, within 24 hours, she said. Otherwise disagreements can go unresolved and resentments can simmer.

When you reconvene, try not to simply repeat what you were saying before, Ms. Clemons said. Start by noting something you appreciate about how your partner deals with money, even if it’s just acknowledging that he or she pays certain bills on time.

Mistake 4: Focusing only on scarcity

Megan McCoy, an assistant professor in the personal financial planning department at Kansas State University, did not downplay the [financial stresses that many couples face](#). Sometimes there just isn’t enough money, and no amount of verbal jiu-jitsu can alleviate the strain that puts on a relationship. But when possible, she thinks couples should inject some playfulness into their financial conversations.

For example: Twice a year, Dr. McCoy and her husband buy a Powerball ticket and spend a date night talking about what they would do if they won. What would they spend more time doing? Would they travel more? Would they pay someone to take on certain chores around the house? Perhaps, then, they might start saving more for a vacation or have a conversation about redistributing the domestic load to feel more equal.

“I really do think it’s a huge mistake to only talk about scarcity — where we should cut, how we should budget,” Dr. McCoy said. “You can learn so much from having those positive, playful conversations.”

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