Resolving Marital Conflict Over Money

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Sadly, today's 52% divorce rate frequently arises from complaints by one or both spouses in two key areas: sex and money. One reason for this is the quest for personal independence. Getting married forces us to surrender individual existence for a shared life, and this can lead to a confrontation with selfishness and trust issues in combining money and making spending or saving decisions. She may want to save for a dream vacation while he is ready to plunk down every cent on a new gun rack or bowling ball.

Everyone brings unique values to a marriage. Learning how to share a household budget and curb spending excesses that were manageable before have led many a couple to the brink of divorce. It takes time to get used to the idea of sharing intimate purchasing goals and long-term savings plans with another human who is imperfect, just as each of us is. If one of the spouses changes jobs or takes a pay cut, the other may become resentful, and conflict may result.

Credit cards are another source of tension, with the average household consumer debt in the $6,000 to $10,000 range, although many families carry even higher balances. Balancing risk-taking with security needs can be precarious for the couple, especially if they bring differing philosophies to the marriage. So what can couples do to effectively combine incomes and merge goals without losing their patience or love for one another?

1. Let one person become the principal budget master. This might be the one who keeps careful accounts and employs long-range economic vision to benefit everyone in the family. He or she can manage the checkbook, monito savings, and recommend cost-cutting strategies for family members to follow. However, this should be handled with care to avoid creating tensions or currying disfavor and resentment. The couple may want to share the duty or trade off each year.

2. Review financial holdings each year. Both parties should have a clear understanding of where the money is going, with the option of suggesting alternative ways of managing the budget or making changes to accommodate extra income or its reduction. These discussions need to take place at a time when neither person is under stress from other factors, but can comfortably turn their attention to money matters without becoming edgy or stressed out.

3. Be flexible. Realize that neither of you will probably endorse all the ways that your partner wants to spend money. But that's how individualism works. Set aside a monthly "allowance" for each spouse's personal use, no questions asked. If more is needed from the joint checkbook, though, both parties should approve to keep the account from being drained without the other spouse's consent.

4. Share goals. While allowing for individual spending choices, make time to discuss shared goals and plans that both of you want. This will help each of you to have buy-in to the overall budget and a shared sense of control for the future.

5. Don't hold grudges. When one of the spouses overspends, spends unwisely, or doesn't spend enough, don't make an issue out of it. Arrange a casual conversation to address the concern and try to make adjustments so that both of you can avoid further problems and feel comfortable with the budget.

Don't let money tear you apart. Use it as a tool to wedge you together and to build a brighter tomorrow.

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