

# **MONEY FIGHTS**

**An Article Written by Gail E. Hudson**

## **Why couples fight over money.**

**"Money is the number one thing that couples fight about in America," says Howard Markman, Ph.D., professor of psychology and director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. "Since financial decisions have to be made almost daily, it's a frequent source of disagreement. Yet couples often don't know how to deal with these conflicts, and they get stuck."**

**There are many underlying emotional issues that can cause money battles. "Sometimes it's a matter of power and control," Markman explains. "Sometimes the fights stem from the couple's different family backgrounds. What's surprising to many couples is that money fights are not a function of how much money you have or don't have."**

**Adriane G. Berg, author of *How to Stop Fighting About Money and Make Some: A Couple's Guide to Financial Success* (Avon), agrees. "People fight about money no matter what their income is," she says. "Some couples argue over whether to go to Barbados or Europe for their vacation. Other couples fight over whether they can afford a vacation at all this year. Sure, a higher income can reduce stress, but it doesn't necessarily stop the fighting."**

**Money fights are especially common during the early child-rearing years, notes Berg. Often one parent cuts back to part-time work or even quits a job to care for the child. Being an at-home parent is challenging, but there's no financial compensation.**

## **Whose money is it?**

**Within most households, there's an "equality myth," according to Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D., coauthor of *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex* (Pocket Books). She says, "We like to believe that we're all entitled to the money." But when the mother, for instance, temporarily leaves the workplace to stay home with her child, the myth is shattered. "She doesn't feel as if the money is really her money," adds Schwartz. "For the most part, she doesn't feel as free as he does to go out and spend the money, especially when it comes to major purchases."**

**Molding ourselves into outdated roles can also cause fights between partners.**

**Even when incomes are equal and stereotypical roles are avoided, couples will battle because of their conflicting styles of spending and saving money. "One will be the**

big spender, the other will be the penny-pincher," explains Adriane Berg. "One is the pessimist, and the other is the optimist." The hostility increases as the stakes grow higher: how much to spend on birthdays, whether to start a college fund now or later, how much of a mortgage is affordable.

Why is it so difficult to compromise? Our style of money management often stems from our childhoods, explains William Betcher, M.D., author of *The Seven Basic Quarrels of Marriage* (Villard). "Early on we absorb many messages about money from our families," he says. "By the time we reach adulthood, we frequently mimic our parents' emotional relationship with money." Ironically, we often choose partners whose attitudes toward money are very different from our own. Recessary woes.

Our sliding economy is another source of money battles. "Many couples took on a number of debts, thinking that their jobs were secure," explains Berg, "and then the recession hit. Many couples feel frustrated because both of them work and work, and yet they barely make ends meet. Whenever there has to be a major shift in spending habits, conflicts start to surface."

### **Reevaluating priorities.**

Couples strapped for cash have to be especially careful about judging each other too harshly, observes Adriane Berg. Whether it's new clothes for the kids or a bigger TV set, insisting that what your partner wants isn't "necessary" won't resolve spending dilemmas. Instead, parents should help each other figure out how to prioritize their purchases--recognizing that each of them will have different, although no less valid, needs.

If couples are willing to hear each other out, reevaluating their priorities can actually help new values to emerge. "I've seen many people discover a deeper understanding of each other," says Berg, "a stronger family commitment. If couples make it through these tough economic times, inevitably they come out stronger." Now is the time to introduce children to the importance of cooperation, viewing themselves as family team members. When parents can't supply name-brand goods, they can at least supply more family time at home and a bit of ingenuity.

"You have to frame the situation in a positive light," adds Berg, "such as, I'm sorry we don't have the money to get a mountain bike for you, but I'd be glad to help you scheme out ways for you to earn enough money to buy one."

There are a lot of families whose incomes are suffering because of the economic downturn, explains Berg. "But no matter what the degree of hardship, all couples must learn to negotiate with each other about money issues, a task that can bring even the most level-headed parents to the boiling point."

### **The last taboo.**

Couples think nothing of revealing intimate details about their childhoods, previous

love affairs, and dreams of the future, observes William Betcher. But when money is the topic, partners skirt around the issue, unable to talk openly about current debts, income, or spending habits. "Freud once said money is the last taboo, which is true," adds Betcher. "It's a lesson we learn as far back as early childhood when we see our parents' discomfort in talking about how much money they make or how much a gift costs."

Berg believes that the inability to talk openly about money matters is probably the most difficult problem for couples to resolve. "But it's crucial that they try," she cautions. In the worst cases, it creates an "I've got a secret" scenario, explains Berg. Spouses hide purchases or old debts, and when the secret is discovered, the inevitable feelings of betrayal and guilt can seriously threaten a marriage.

A good way to start having more open money talks is to discuss your spending styles with each other. How did your childhoods share your beliefs about money? What are your spending priorities? Are they in sync with your partner's? Don't be disturbed if you find that your priorities conflict. As Berg explains, "The important goal here is to compromise. If you let go of right or wrong, it will be a lot easier to give and take."

Once your different backgrounds and spending styles are clarified, it's time to focus on your connections, according to Betcher. Ultimately you want to reach a position in which you respect your partner's relationship with money. "I don't mean giving lip service, saying, 'Yeah, yeah, I respect your opinion, but mine is right.' Instead, partners should look deeper," Betcher suggests, recognizing that it's possible to admire or even envy your husband's cavalier attitude toward spending money or your wife's knack for saving it.

Fights over discretionary spending were almost routine for Sara and Ralph, who deposited their paychecks into a joint account. Ralph, a bus driver, likes shopping and spending money. Sara, a payroll clerk, says she always led "a spartan lifestyle" before she married.

## **Equal financial partners.**

Whether your family has lots of or little cash to spare, it's always a good idea for parents to share equally the responsibilities of budgeting, investing, and saving money. When you're dividing up tasks, consider your talents and interests rather than assume stereotypical roles. Who gets a bigger paycheck, notes Berg, doesn't determine who is more of a financial whiz or the better accountant.

Similarly, some debts may be more emotionally stressful for one partner than for the other. Alimony payments, money owed to family members, doctors' bills -- if there's a negative connection for one parent, notes Pepper Schwartz, maybe the other could handle writing the checks and resolving disputes.

When couples can afford it, a dose of autonomy for the partner who makes less money or who doesn't hold a job also helps, suggests Berg. Even a separate personal

checking account can make a big difference. To decide how much should go into that account, add up how much it would cost to hire someone to do a stay-at-home parent's job: high-quality child care at \$6 an hour, housekeeper at \$5 an hour; household repairs at \$25 an hour, chef at \$9.50 an hour. A week's total would leave no doubt about the stay-at-home parent's financial contribution.

At the same time, though, Berg notes that when money is tight, it may be necessary for both partners to work toward bringing more income into the home. "Many times, the contributions that a spouse could make by working outweigh those gained from staying at home -- especially once the children are in school," she says. Any disagreements about if or when an at-home parent should return to work must be aired, Berg notes, to avoid resentment.

### **Setting up a "boardroom."**

"Couples have to realize that they need to run their home like the financial institution that it is," says Berg. She recommends that parents hold regular money meetings to discuss financial decisions and that they maintain good record keeping. "I always say, 'Take the money discussions out of the bedroom and put them in the boardroom, where they belong.'"

Ideally, couples meet weekly. The "boardroom" should have good lighting, two comfortable chairs, and a table that is large enough to enable parents to spread out pencils, a calculator, and all of the necessary paperwork. Remember, though, that this is not a time to fight, cautions Berg. This is a time for decision making and information sharing. It's also a time for couples to choose who will perform which duty. "One of you may opt to call the utility company because there's a mistake on the bill," she says. "The other might opt to call for estimates on car repairs."

During the week, each partner writes down agency items on a master list. Go through the items one by one, Berg suggests, until you're done. If you can't finish the agenda, schedule a follow-up meeting. Never end a weekly "board meeting" without planning the next one.

"This may cause some discomfort at first," says Berg. "It's a new way of managing a delicate topic." But stick with it; those who do often discover that there is less arguing and more money. "The fight is over because your goals are met," she says.

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Gail Hudson has also written a book of special interest to parents - "[Child Magazine's Guide to Quarreling](#) "