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Financial matters are top cause of couples' arguments, survey shows

Financial matters are top cause of couples' spats, survey shows

BY KEN TYSIAC

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Couples argue more about financial matters than any other topic, according to a Harris Interactive survey conducted for the AICPA.

Twenty-seven percent of respondents in a national survey who are married or living with a partner said disagreements over money are most likely to prompt an argument. None of the other common causes of discord – children, chores, work, or friends – causes as many spats.

“For whatever the reason, whether it’s a lack of time or a lack of comfort in talking about it, couples do not speak about money frankly and openly enough, and that leads to arguments and conflicts within their relationship,” said Jordan Amin, chairman of the National CPA Financial Literacy Commission.

Most often, couples disagree whether expenditures are necessities or luxuries; 58% of those who argue about money report arguments prompted by differing opinions of “needs” vs. “wants.” Forty-nine percent argue about unexpected expenses, and 32% argue about insufficient savings.

Failure to communicate about finances contributes to the conflict between couples, according to the survey. Fifty-five percent of survey participants who are married or living with a partner reported that they do not set aside time regularly to talk about their finances.

Financial discussions sometimes get set aside because couples are busy, Amin said. He said money also can be difficult for people to talk about.

“A lot of us grew up ... where talking about money was a little bit taboo and we didn’t know anything about our family’s finances,” Amin said. “Some people still have that behavior and secrecy around it.”

Amin said it’s important for new couples to understand each partner’s current financial situation and history with money. He said that history – whether they grew up wealthy or poor, whether they have been unemployed or have parents who fought about money – affects a person’s feelings about money and financial habits.

“It’s just critical that people talk about it and develop a common language around it so they can work toward shared goals,” Amin said.

The National CPA Financial Literacy Commission offers four tips to keep finances from driving a wedge between couples:

- **Get full disclosure.** Before marrying, moving in together, or mingling assets, couples should fully disclose their finances as part of a joint financial planning process. Each person should routinely review credit card accounts, bank statements, and credit reports to keep all data in the open.
- **Set a money date.** Set aside time regularly – ideally, once a week – to meet about family finances without other distractions.
- **Divide and conquer.** Split the duties of managing accounts and paying bills. Although one person in a relationship often takes the lead in these duties, this arrangement can lead to stress, tension, and confusion. If one person pays bills and the other tracks money, for instance, a check and balance on the family finances is created.
- **Hire an adviser.** A neutral third party can reduce tensions over money by working with couples to establish financial goals, pay bills, monitor accounts, and notice any unusual spending patterns.

Open, honest communication is just as important with finances as any other decision made in a relationship, whether it’s buying a house, changing jobs, having children, or deciding where children attend school, Amin said.

“You don’t need to solve all the world’s problems in one evening,” he said, “but you certainly could start somewhere. Whether that’s creating a budget together or reviewing last month’s credit card statement to see how much you spent ... you can put your cards on the table and sort of come to a shared decision about what you can and can’t afford, and what you should and shouldn’t buy.”

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