

Secrets of Cash-Savvy Couples

By Karin Price Mueller

These couples reveal their solutions for strengthening your marriage -- and your finances.

Open Up

Kimberly and Liam have built a strong marriage over 11 years.

Communication has never been a problem -- except when it comes to money.

"I cringe when I have to sit down and talk to him about the bills," says Kimberly, 37, a stay-at-home mom, of Monmouth County, New Jersey.

It's not that she's a big spender with frivolous purchases that surprise her husband. It's simply that Liam's salary, nearing six figures, barely covers the cost of living for them and their two young children.

"Liam makes a good salary, but the cost of raising two children in this day and age is high," she says. "I feel there's not enough money to go around." Liam agrees that cash is tight. So when it's time for Kimberly, who manages the day-to-day finances, to update Liam, she doesn't want to break the bad news. It's going to mean a combination of credit card interest charges, possible late payments, or a discussion about belt-tightening. Worse than that, it takes Liam a few days to recover his jolly mood around the house after a money debriefing. And in return, Kimberly feels pressure and guilt -- she wonders if she should be doing a better job managing the money.

Kimberly's certainly not alone. In fact, just about every couple -- even those perfect neighbors of yours who never show any signs of tension -- has faced some kind of money trouble. Whatever your financial challenge, the biggest obstacle to solving it is a lack of communication.

"Money is harder to talk about than sex," says Margaret Shapiro, a Philadelphia-based licensed clinical social worker



But not being open is the source of most money stresses. Debra Morrison, a certified financial planner with RegentAtlantic Capital in Chatham, New Jersey, agrees. She says couples often overlook writing down a list of goals or expectations, so they're unable to revisit their plan to see what's working and what's not.

"People don't talk about their goals for fear their partner will think them stupid, or for fear they don't know enough so they'll do it wrong," Morrison says. "Instead, they need to be open and honest about their hopes and dreams so together they can create a plan to achieve them."

Establish goals together: Trying to reach goals without understanding what your partner wants is like going target shooting without a target, Morrison says. First, you should each separately write down your goals -- both short- and long-term -- whether it's to buy a bigger home, to save for retirement, or to take a family vacation to Disneyland. Next, trade your goal lists with each other, and take a few days to mull over what's important to your partner. Then, have a powwow to reconcile your goals. Decide what's most important to you both, and then see how your individual goals can fit into your joint financial plan. "This tends to dissipate the emotions about budgeting and the emotion over who names what as a necessary expense," Morrison says.

"We need to stop taking our emotional temperature and financial temperature based on the financial pornography that's out there," says Morrison. "There's hysteria in the media, but it doesn't necessarily apply to your long-term plan."

"Measure your progress and congratulate yourself if you moved closer to a goal," Morrison says. "Success breeds success."