

MOMS
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MONEY IS A HOT-BUTTON issue in marriage, but in my work as a therapist, I've found that it can be particularly thorny when women outearn men—even in 2020. Gender-role expectations (women are “nurturers,” men are “providers”) influence all of us more than we'd like, and they can make honest conversations difficult.

Moms who love their job and are proud of their career get mixed messages from society and sometimes from their partner. Corinne, who has a more high-powered job than her husband, Rod, was blindsided when he said he felt neglected. “I thought we were on the same team. Life's busy, and we're all working together,” she told me. “He loves my income, but he doesn't understand that I can't take care of everyone 24/7 too.”

What are the best ways to communicate skillfully about earning differences? Keep these five points in mind.

Respect each other no matter what your earnings or social status.

Avoid using words that relate to gender stereotypes. A dad who's spending more time caring for the kids may be sensitive if he's told he's not “ambitious” enough, and a hardworking mom might be offended if she's told she's not “caring” enough. Instead, focus on whether you're each contributing to the family's

When Mom's the Breadwinner, There's No Loser

We all want to be successful, yet earning more than your partner can still stir up mixed emotions. Here's how to make sure both of you feel valued.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, PH.D.**

well-being in a way that feels fair to both of you. If not, find nonblaming ways to discuss it. Start with what your partner is doing right (“I so appreciate all the ways you support me in my work”) before raising potential areas of improvement (“Things would feel fairer to me if we divided up the cooking differently”). Really listen to each other and keep talking until you find a workable compromise.

Accept that talking about finances raises fears.

I encourage couples to have a “money date” or use our therapy session to listen to each other’s stories about money. If you learn that your wife’s embarrassment about her run-down home as a kid has fueled her desire to make a good living or that your husband’s father’s workaholicism made him vow to lead a more balanced life, it will give you more empathy for your partner’s current choices and values.

Consider the mental load.

A common complaint I hear from higher-earning moms is that they still have the lion’s share of responsibility for the practical and emotional needs of their family. When couples come to me with this problem, I suggest they each reconsider their own perspective. Susan, a successful executive, said, “It’s up to me to keep track of everything and also pay most of the bills!” Her husband, Stuart, saw it differently: “She micromanages me when she’s at work, telling me what snack to give the kids and how to spend our time. She makes more work for herself when she doesn’t treat me as a competent parent.” Although her detail-oriented approach was an asset at her job, Susan had to relax her desire for control at home. But Stuart had underrated the importance of keeping the mental map of the family’s needs—in part because he was angry about her micromanaging. They agreed to have a weekly meeting to keep track of who was doing what.

Try to be both “hard-nosed” and “softhearted.”

Ideally, you want to deal with economic realities and career ambitions while

offering love and support. And the challenge of doing both extends beyond situations where the woman already earns more. Tom and Bridget came to see me because Bridget wanted to start a personal-organizing business. When she shared the idea with Tom, he said, “If you can cover the cost of child care, I’m fine with it.” I told them Bridget’s goals shouldn’t be treated as “hers” to finance and that they needed to look at the big picture together.

Responding to each other’s “soft” feelings (her dreams, his fears) was the first step, and making “hard-nosed” agreements was the second. They decided to use their vacation savings as start-up costs for her business and plan on ten hours per week of child care. After six months, they’d reassess. This gave them a mutual understanding about their timeline and investment so they had a sense of shared purpose.

If you’re stressed, it’s not necessarily your partner’s fault.

When you have an engaging and busy job, it’s easy to criticize your partner for not helping out enough. The person making more money can feel more entitled to complain—and this isn’t true only for male-female partnerships. Kate and Olivia, parents of two kids, came to see me because Olivia felt that Kate, the family’s big earner, was critical of how Olivia ran the household. We discovered that Kate was so used to directing people at her job that she carried that attitude over to their home life. When you have a lot of balls in the air, you may crave more help, but don’t devalue what your partner does. Empathy and fairness are the keys to defusing tension about different responsibilities and roles. And have some empathy for yourself too. Take a moment to feel proud of all you’ve accomplished and all the ways you’re able to support your family. ✕



Daphne de Marneffe, Ph.D., is a psychologist and the author of *Maternal Desire* and *The Rough Patch: Marriage and the Art of Living Together*. Visit her at daphnedemarneffe.com.