

What to Do When You Disagree About What Comes Next

When partners have different visions of the future—to have another child or not, to stay or to move—both parties can end up feeling stuck. But there is a way forward.

by DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, Ph.D.



IN THE COURSE of any relationship, partners make many big decisions. Some are all-or-nothing, like having a third child. Others can (with some effort) be changed, like deciding to switch careers or figuring out how to care for an aging parent. Some are likely to inspire an array of different opinions—everything from holding your child back a grade to lending a family member money. For some couples, COVID-19 has added new, unexpected dilemmas (do we leave the

city? send our children back to school?) that go to the very heart of their family's emotional, fiscal, and physical health.

Big decisions have high stakes, which inevitably elicit strong emotions, and we all know it's not easy having strong emotions that are at odds with your partner's. Each partner understandably worries that the other will resent going along with an outcome they didn't choose, which is dangerous, since resentment is toxic to any relationship. In my years as a

therapist, I have found that one of my most important roles is to help couples make big decisions that they both can feel truly good about, even if one had to relinquish something that really mattered to them.

Take Cara and Jeff, a busy couple with a 5-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter. Cara yearned for another baby, even though both she and Jeff knew their lives were too hectic as it was. Jeff felt they were finally getting to a place where their kids were more independent.

"I want to prioritize spending more time with the children we already have," he said. One day Cara came to our session looking mournful. "I think I'm beginning to relinquish the dream of another child. I don't really see how it would work," she said. "I'm sad about it, but I think I'm accepting it." Jeff jumped in: "I don't think you're really over it, because look how sad you still are," he said. "I'm afraid you'll hold it against me."

Jeff was falling prey to a common confusion. Because Cara was sad and not yet "over it," Jeff worried that she was squelching her feelings and surrendering to his, something he rightly feared might come back to bite him. But just because your partner is still sad doesn't mean their evolving acceptance is suspect. Cara was sad because she was experiencing a loss, and only through grieving it would she arrive at acceptance. She'd have good and bad days, sad and happy days; relinquishing a cherished hope doesn't happen with a snap of the fingers. In the future, when she sees a newborn, she may want to share her wistfulness with Jeff so that he understands her. But that won't mean that she's "going back" on the decision. "For you, Jeff, the challenge is to bear her sadness and comfort her without thinking you have to fix it or go back on your position," I said. In the end, Jeff and Cara had an open discussion that confirmed what they both knew: They would not have another child.

But it was healthy and wise of Cara to bring her feelings to Jeff, even if she knew he might not agree with them. If you find yourself giving in on decisions to "keep the peace," be aware that your strategy may lead to a buildup of resentment. You owe it to yourself and the relationship to insist on having your voice heard. I often counsel couples to make explicit agreements about how they will deal with big decisions. One couple said they would trade off every five years on whose career got priority. Another agreed that they would live nearer to his parents and budget two vacations per year to visit hers. Agreements compel a couple to get the question of fairness on the table and hone their skills for self-advocacy, negotiation, and compromise.

I've developed a strategy to help couples review big decisions, because how couples talk in making these decisions can either promote or get in the way of a successful outcome. Here are my step-by-step guidelines.

● **Set aside dedicated time to talk.**

Discussing big decisions takes emotional energy. Schedule times to address the issue when you're not tired or distracted. You need to bring your best game to these conversations, so don't try to fit them in around the edges. Pick a time that works for both of you, and treat it with the respect and discipline of a regular appointment. It will also take multiple discussions. Accepting that at the outset can head off conflicting expectations.

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● **Give each person a turn to speak.**

Your goal is to fully understand your partner's perspective. Ask probing questions. Be curious. Don't interrupt or argue your position. (Easier said than done, but it's crucial.) Your shared goal is to get everything out in the open. When it's your turn to talk, dig deep to identify all your motives. Is it possible that you want another child in part because your best friend is pregnant? Develop as full an understanding of each other's worlds as you can, without judgment.

● **Problem-solve.**

Once you both think you understand each partner's feelings on the issue, put your heads together to create a strategy for decision making. Say you are deciding whether to move. Before you start to build your respective cases, go on a fact-finding mission. Figure out what information you're missing that you'll need in order to

assess pros and cons. Divide the tasks and agree when you'll meet to discuss what you've learned. If you find that both of you are still on the fence, set a mutually agreed-upon deadline for the decision.

● **Circle back to your feelings.**

Check in with each other about how and whether your problem-solving talks have changed your perspective. If you hear each other out rather than focusing on making your own case, an amazing thing happens: Each person struggles with their own mixed feelings instead of fighting their partner. Talk about what will be hard for you as a couple if you decide one way or the other so you can anticipate the challenges. Discuss whether you feel that deciding this issue in favor of one person's point of view means the other partner will have priority in some future decision. Thinking through your future expectations together will help head off misunderstandings. And it's not the worst idea to take notes so there's a paper trail of the process you followed, something to refer to if your memories differ later.

In the end, both partners should feel that it was a joint decision. What's the proof that you were successful? After the choice is made, you don't throw it in each other's faces or relitigate it. Cara can admit to Jeff that "some days, I still feel sad," or even, "some days, I feel as if I wish I hadn't agreed." But she can't rewrite history, saying, "You didn't listen to me," or acting like they'd never made an agreement.

In a couple, there are two individuals and there is the relationship. Sometimes one individual has to give up a wish or a goal. That can be disappointing and painful, but compromise is necessary for a relationship to thrive. When it comes to big life decisions, the object is to be able both to advocate for your own beliefs and to truly accept a decision that doesn't go your way. What helps most is for the partners to believe in the process they used to resolve the issue. ✕



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