

YOU MAY
HAVE SOME NEW
ISSUES
TO UNPACK!



Staying in Sync When You Move

Figuring out what to spend, where to live, and what matters most about your future home is fraught with emotion. Here's how you can manage the roller-coaster ride together.

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

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EVEN NOW, I still remember the day I unpacked the newspaper-wrapped pots and pans in our new kitchen. My husband and I had bought a ranch-style house after years of saving, researching neighborhoods and school districts, and living with two tiny kids in a third-floor walk-up apartment. We were happy that the search was over and liked the idea of putting down roots, but I felt disoriented and lonely. We'd bought a small patch of land, but emotionally, I felt like I was looking out over a vast, open sea.

You'll find plenty of advice online about mortgage terms and moving trucks, but the decisions involved with purchasing a house aren't just logistical. Long-term savings goals take teamwork and a shared commitment to discipline and doing without. Agreeing on what to spend, what to prioritize, and what you truly value are all complicated emotional issues that can lead to painful miscommunication.

The good news is that if you both pay attention to the relationship challenges of buying a home and moving, you can come out of the process feeling even stronger as a couple.

➔ **Talk, talk, talk.**

House-buying discussions are hard because they involve both dreaming big and being

practical. Jude and Sarah, a couple I saw in therapy, demonstrated a familiar tension. Each time Sarah talked about her dreams (“I’d love to live in the country”), Jude stepped in with a practical objection (“We’d never find work there”). In this apples-and-oranges interaction, they both felt unheard.

That’s why I recommend that all types of emotional conversations—about money, houses, or anything else—be approached in two phases: a “feelings” phase and a “problem solving” phase. First, partners explore their feelings, with no judgment or criticism of themselves or each other. Second, after all the feelings have been laid out, they put their heads together and find an agreement that will work for them as individuals and as a couple.

➔ **Don’t typecast each other.**

When couples are buying a house, it’s common for each partner to take on a role. One is seen as the spender, the other as the saver. One is the impractical dreamer, the other is a tightwad. It’s best if you both feel responsible for thinking about all the trade-offs involved. You each need to grapple with the hard questions, rather than simply turning it into a fight.

When people get assigned to roles, their problem solving is less effective. Lucy and Stephen bought their house 15 years ago, and it’s still a point of friction. According to Lucy, Stephen hadn’t really listened to her desire to stay in the same town as her family and friends even though the schools weren’t as good. But when we probed further, Lucy acknowledged



that she hadn’t fully voiced her opinion. She hadn’t wanted to be seen as too emotional or selfish in the face of Stephen’s “rational argument” for a different suburb with stronger schools. Both partners need to share their thoughts and feelings, but sometimes it takes effort and courage to get heard or to stand up to your partner’s point of view.

➔ **Think about the big picture.**

A house is one of the largest investments most people will ever make, yet distortions can creep into your thinking. For instance, what social scientists call “the power of now” means that people often choose to enjoy something in the present rather than think about the longer-term costs and benefits.

When you find a house in a faraway suburb that has an extra bedroom or a larger

yard, you may minimize the headache of a commute and its drain on family time (not to mention the cost to the environment). Feeling cramped in a too-small apartment or anxious about keeping up with the Joneses can also cloud your decision-making process. Try to be a friend to your future selves: Think together about what life will feel like under the pressure of too much debt or punishing commute times.

➔ **Dig into your compassion bucket.**

Moving is an exhausting ordeal. It adds a huge number of new tasks to your already-busy lives, and you’ll feel uprooted, especially if you are moving far away. Even if it’s a good decision, you may still feel sad or off-kilter. The kids may be cranky and out of sorts, too, just when you want to get the house organized in order to feel serene.

Like any loss, this one will take time to recover from, but sometimes couples start feeling a big empathy gap when they move. Kristin and Jim each felt misunderstood: He couldn’t help much at home because he was doing his best to succeed at a new job, and she was lonely and exhausted with their infant twins in a house full of boxes. Even if you don’t have the money to fly your parents to you or hire extra help, you can still offer understanding and appreciation to each other for the different challenges you’re facing. As Jim told me, “Once Kristin realized how much I was struggling, I felt like she saw me as a good person again, and instead of defending myself, I took some steps to lighten her load.”

Since I unpacked our own kitchen all those years ago, we’ve made our house a home. Of course, it took us a while to feel truly settled. Years later, when we remodeled (a topic for another column!), that wasn’t always pleasant either. Decisions were complicated, and conversations were sometimes hard. But whenever you undertake a big, many-sided project like buying a house and you accomplish it together, it builds your bond and the foundation of your family life. You can feel proud of that. ✘



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