

# Having Meaningful Money Conversations With Your Partner

Communication is essential in any relationship, and that includes being able to talk about money. In a BMO Financial Group study,<sup>1</sup> Canadians cited conflicts over finances (68 per cent) as the primary reason why a couple might divorce; ahead of infidelity (60 per cent) and disagreements about family (36 per cent). Money has the potential to be a source of tension and conflict for any couple, regardless of their net worth. This article provides some suggestions to help you and your partner have more meaningful discussions around money,

“Being able to talk openly and honestly with your partner about money is an important skill,” says Kathleen Burns Kingsbury, Wealth Psychologist and author of several books, including her soon to be released book, *Breaking Money Silence*. Whether you’re newly committed or have been together for many years, Kathleen shares the following insights to help couples begin their money conversations.

## Start with a financial success

When you first sit down to discuss money and your financial situation, each partner should start by sharing one financial success. It should be something that is authentic to you and makes you proud. “When it comes to managing money, couples tend to focus on the negative. Therefore, starting the discussion by sharing something that you’ve accomplished around money starts the conversation off on a positive tone,” says Kathleen. The financial success you share can be largescale (e.g., ‘An investment I bought turned a large profit.’) or small (e.g., ‘I balance my cheque book every month.’). What’s important is that each person actively listens to their partner, asks open-ended questions and that you have a discussion around your respective financial successes.

## Don’t play the ‘blame game’

Couples often fall into the trap of pointing fingers and saying ‘you did this’ or ‘you didn’t do that.’ Therefore, it’s extremely

important for each partner to try to understand each other’s relationship with money. Kathleen suggests answering some basic questions around money, such as, ‘What is my first money memory?’ ‘What did I learn about money from this first memory?’ and ‘What were a few of my family money messages?’ With proper clarity, partners can then have a discussion around the answers to these questions.

## Sharing stories

Sharing stories will help you better understand your partner’s money mindset – their experiences, thoughts and beliefs around money. Ultimately, these experiences impact how we view and use money today. Kathleen shares the following questions to help you and your partner gain additional insight into your money mindset.<sup>2</sup>

- What did you learn from your father and/or mother about money?
- What is it like for you to talk with loved ones about money?
- What financial message(s) or lesson(s) do you want to pass onto your children?
- What is your definition of financial freedom?
- What is the relationship between love and money?
- What is your biggest financial fear?
- What are you tolerating financially?

## Guidelines for a positive 'money talk' with your partner<sup>3</sup>

When having money discussions, consider the following guidelines to ensure your conversations remain positive and you don't put your partner on the defensive. These guidelines are adapted from Kathleen Burns Kingsbury's upcoming book, *Breaking Money Silence*.

### 1. Be respectful

It's always important to treat the other person with respect. Respectful behaviours include listening carefully, not interrupting and refraining from using profanity or "blaming language."

### 2. Use "I" statements

Whenever possible, use "I" statements to communicate how you feel and what specific action triggers this emotion. Avoid the urge to point a finger and blame your partner. Using "I" statements allows you to effectively communicate your message and engage in a more productive conversation. Consider the following example:

- Statement 1: "You better stop giving Zachary the credit card to fill up his car if you want him to learn the value of a dollar."
- Statement 2: "When I see you giving Zachary the credit card to fill up his car, I worry that he is not learning the value of a dollar."

The first statement puts the listener on the defensive and has a blaming tone. The second statement identifies the speaker's concerns, feelings about the specific behavior mentioned and sets a more positive tone. While a couple may still disagree about how to teach their children the value of a dollar, the likelihood of them calmly discussing their differences is increased by the use of "I" statements.

### 3. Active Listening

Active listening is a communication technique that aids in mutual understanding. It involves asking open-ended questions, then listening carefully to the answers. Unlike passive listening, active listening involves paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal communications. This type of listening does not involve you offering your opinion on the information shared by your partner; instead, the goal is to try to put yourself in your partner's shoes so you can truly appreciate their perspective.

### 4. Don't be a mind reader

Couples that have been together for a long time have a lot of history and shared experiences. As a result, it can be very easy to jump to conclusions about your partner's views on any topic being discussed. During money conversations don't try to read your partner's thoughts, and don't make assumptions. Instead, ask open-ended questions to learn more about his or her money mindset. When you make assumptions they are often based on your own money mindset, not your partner's. Mind reading tends to make people angry because the person doesn't feel heard.

### 5. Practice curiosity

Bring a healthy dose of curiosity to every money conversation. To do this, pretend you are a journalist interviewing a subject for a story. Ask thoughtful, clarifying questions to learn more about your partner's perspective on the financial matter at hand. When you focus on where your partner is coming from, you learn more, and your mind becomes too preoccupied to start an argument.

### 6. Agree to disagree

Tread lightly and agree to disagree before you engage in a money dialogue. The goal is to understand each other's viewpoint, to keep an open mind, and to lay the groundwork for more positive financial dialogues in the future. The point is not to win the argument. From time to time you and your loved one won't agree, and no matter how much you discuss the topic you will each view the situation differently. Instead of getting caught up by the fact that you don't agree, embrace it. Differences make life interesting and rich.

Even when you agree to disagree, the money talk should still be considered successful. The goal is mutual understanding, not total agreement. If you learned something new about your partner, then it was a worthwhile conversation.

### 7. Give yourself a reward

Reward yourselves after each financial conversation. Together, you have taken a proactive step toward financial health and wellness and you deserve to celebrate. The reward doesn't need to be expensive or extravagant, but should be something that's meaningful to both of you. It can be as simple as taking a walk around your neighbourhood, watching your favourite show together or giving each other a high five. By combining a positive experience with every financial conversation, you reinforce that money talk is an enjoyable experience.

## Schedule a money conversation today

“Couples often share that if they could do one thing differently, from a financial perspective, they would have started having money discussions earlier in their relationship,” says Kathleen. “They believe they would be more financially secure today as a result of these conversations.” Talking with your partner regularly about money can help improve your future financial security, and your relationship as a couple.



If you're having difficulty getting the conversation started with your partner, ask your BMO financial professional to set aside some time at your next meeting to discuss a financial topic that is important to both of you.

<sup>1</sup> BMO Fourth Annual Valentine's Day RRSP Study: Canadian Couples At Odds On Who's the (Retirement Planning) Boss, February 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from KBK Wealth Connections blog: <http://www.kbkwealthconnection.com/couples-and-money/helping-clients-tap-money-mindset-2/>

<sup>3</sup> These money talk guidelines are adapted from Kathleen Burns Kingsbury's upcoming book, **Breaking Money Silence: How to Shatter Money Taboos, Talk More Openly about Finances and Live a Richer Life**, Praeger, to be published September, 2017.



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