

The cost of silence: Financial stress mutes couples' communication

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The more stressed out people are about finances, the less likely they are to talk about money with their romantic partners, according to new research.

By acknowledging the impact of [financial stress](#) on willingness to communicate and exploring strategies to overcome barriers, couples can strengthen their bond and work together toward financial well-being.

Utilizing both real-world correlational data as well as [experimental data](#), the researchers found compelling evidence that financial stress plays a significant role in hindering communication between partners about finances.

The paper, "[Discussing Money With the One You Love: How Financial Stress Influences Couples' Financial Communication](#)," was published June 15 in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

"This is the first thing that fascinated us about this topic—that financially stressed individuals who need to have these conversations the most are the least likely to have them," said Emily Garbinsky, associate professor in the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management, who co-authored the paper with Suzanne Shu, professor in the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, and Nirajana Mishra, a postdoctoral associate at Yale University.

According to the study, financial stress characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed with spending, struggle to meet [financial obligations](#) and worry about money management, affects a staggering 70% of Americans. They found that even individuals who are objectively well-off can experience financial anxiety, and this type of stress not only creates [conflict](#) but also depletes cognitive resources, making it harder for individuals to engage in constructive conversations with their partners.

Shu and Garbinsky found that one common strategy for dealing with anticipated conflict is to avoid it altogether and when individuals expect discussing financial matters with their partner to lead to conflict, they

are more likely to avoid these conversations. Importantly, what the research team uncovers is that this avoidance stems from the belief that financial conflicts with a partner are perpetual rather than solvable.

The researchers conducted multiple studies to validate their findings. They first analyzed survey data from thousands of participants who either completed the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's National Financial Well-Being Survey or a survey conducted by the National Center for Marriage Research.

Both sets of survey results confirmed that higher levels of financial stress are associated with less communication about finances with a partner. Additionally, a [pilot study](#) revealed that individuals anticipate greater conflict when discussing financial stressors compared to other common stressors, such as work-related issues.

The research also suggests that changing individuals' perceptions of financial conflicts could potentially improve communication between partners.

"When individuals view financial conflicts as an issue they can solve as a team, rather than as a lasting perpetual disagreement, they are more willing to initiate conversations about money with their partners," Shu said. "This finding highlights the importance of reframing how couples approach financial discussions to foster healthier communication patterns."

Looking ahead, future research could explore interventions aimed at normalizing financial stress, potentially reducing its impact on [communication](#) between partners. Additionally, researchers could investigate how stressors from other domains, such as time management, impact couples' willingness to communicate.

More information: Nirajana Mishra et al, Discussing money with the one you love: How financial stress influences couples' financial communication, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1430](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1430)

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