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Financial Infidelity and Abuse

The hidden taboo that no one talks about.

By Jill Fopiano



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How to recognize it

One of my personal and professional missions has been to help break down the walls of the “money taboo,” the reluctance that women have to talk about money and the negative toll this can take on earnings, investments and other financial matters. I published an article on the “money taboo” last spring, and to my surprise I received a number of requests for a follow-up article on money and relationships; in particular, the ways in which money can be cancerous to couples. Specifically, many women shared stories of financial abuse and infidelity, where money

is either used for control or is just plain lied about. Ironically, these women were not reluctant to share their personal stories with me, but many of these bad situations relate, at least in part, to a couple's reluctance to talk about money.

The many faces of financial abuse and infidelity

Financial abuse and infidelity are different, and both can be hard to recognize. Financial abuse is about control. One partner may be controlling the other's ability to acquire, use and maintain financial resources. For example, your partner may try to prevent you from working. If you continue to work, the abuser may restrict your access to the money you earn or even try to take your earnings. Usually, abusers want to make all major financial decisions alone, without consulting the partner who may have earned the money. Some financial abusers use subtle tactics like manipulation while others are more overt, demanding and intimidating. Initially your partner may act as though taking over the finances is a way to make your life easier, and that giving you a set amount of "spending money" will help keep your family on track financially. Over time, the "allowance" can become smaller and before you know it, you may be asking for money and being refused.

Financial infidelity, on the other hand, means lying about or hiding money. Here secrecy is the key, which also makes it difficult to realize when your partner is being dishonest. For example, your partner may actually make more money than they say or may create business or other expenses as an excuse to use more of your household income. Often, this person is funneling funds away from a joint bank account into separate accounts or investments in their name alone. For example, Brian and his wife Kate have been married for some time. For several years, Kate owned a local café before selling it to run a catering business. All along, she has maintained that she makes no profit and she contributes nothing to their household expenses. Although she always requests Brian's financial information for her tax returns, she never provides her information for his. (They claim, "married" but file separately.) Clear to me but not to Brian is that it's not normal or okay to keep your finances completely hidden from your spouse.

Divorce can put a different spin on things. We all know examples of divorced couples where a financially strapped mother with primary custody of the kids has a "Disneyland Dad" ex-spouse who showers the kids with gifts and trips (when he sees them). Over time, the kids come to see Dad as the "fun" parent and Mom as the "mean" one. Partners can also use the threat of divorce as another form of control. A childhood friend of mine, Michelle, had a rocky marriage with a man who controlled their joint finances completely. Ken came from family money and had a much higher paying job than did Michelle. He made all the major decisions, insisted on shared accounts for everything, and used her earnings for their children's expenses while maintaining expensive hobbies like sailing. He threatened her with financial ruin if she divorced him. When she finally left, she discovered that Ken had taken or spent a bulk of their joint assets.

5 Symptoms of relationship financial stress

While every couple's relationship is unique, many financial abuse or infidelity situations have common threads. Isolation is a big one—becoming financially dependent on a life partner or spouse often makes you feel incapable of ever providing for yourself again. That's why it is important to recognize signs of financial trouble in your relationship as early as possible. Some major indicators may include:

1. As a couple, you have little or no communication about money matters and do not discuss joint purchases, financial decisions, or long term goals. Your partner controls the “purse strings”, giving you an allowance or requiring you to ask for money “as needed”, and makes it impossible for you to see your overall financial picture as a couple. This lack of understanding of the big picture puts you at an information disadvantage.
2. Your partner controls your use or access to money you've earned, takes your money or credit cards without permission, expects you to pay for their bills, feels entitled to your money and assets but won't share theirs. This is a classic sign of an attempt to use money as a control mechanism.
3. You feel unable to be honest with your partner about your spending; sure we all like to splurge sometimes but if you cannot be upfront about what you are spending it could be a sign of a deeper underlying trust issue. Alternatively, you feel your partner may be hiding what they are spending.
4. Your partner interferes with your ability to work, including belittling your choice of job or career, sabotaging or not honoring your work responsibilities, harassing you at work with calls, texts or impromptu visits, or even pressuring you to quit, sometimes using children as an excuse. Your voice is the most important one in any decisions related to your work.
5. You feel like you are shouldering a disproportionate share of the household expenses, be they housing, child-related or even vacations. If you feel resentment about what you are spending it will likely carry over into other parts of your relationship.

5 strategies for financial strength and self-sufficiency

Starting a relationship off on the right financial foot can make it much harder for financial abuse or infidelity to take hold. Yet even if you find yourself victimized by these behaviors, there are steps you can take to break free.

1. Become financially transparent: Dating partners, newlyweds or anyone considering a serious relationship should start by being financially transparent: your finances, their finances, expectations; everything out in the open.
2. Protect your financial independence: Retain your own income stream if possible, or at least maintain professional credentials, contacts and marketable skills; keep some credit and assets in your own name.

3. Don't be overly vulnerable: Being up front about finances doesn't mean granting access to your funds; keep your credit card, bank and computer PINS and passwords to yourself.
4. Participate in all major financial decisions: Household budgeting, investments, large purchases, long and short-term savings goals should all be joint conversations. If you find this difficult, engage a financial planner who will encourage you to look at your entire financial landscape. Sometimes it's easier to have those touchy conversations facilitated by a third party.
5. If you suspect or know that your partner is trying to victimize you financially, seek professional help from an attorney. There can be serious legal implications from financial infidelity; for example, you are on the hook for all the debt your spouse may take. It's imperative that at some point you protect yourself and your future.

It's important to remember that you are not alone — even though you may feel that way. If you can find a supportive community to engage with on this difficult topic, you will certainly discover that many others have experienced similar situations and that they would be happy to share resources. It's just not something that comes up in every day conversation. But like any “taboo” topic, the way it will be broken down is when the pain of talking about it becomes less than the pain of living with it. Let's continue to break down those walls and keep the conversation flowing...knowledge is power and a key step along the way is communication.

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Jill Fopiano

Jill A. Fopiano, President & CEO

Jill Fopiano joined O'Brien Wealth Partners LLC in September 2012 as a Principal. In October 2016 she became the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Investment Officer, and majority owner of the firm.

Possessing more than twenty years of experience at major global banks, Jill brings unique perspective and capability in both institutional investments and private banking. Jill's global financial career at Citi and US Trust spanned alternative investments, trading, and financial planning and wealth management. She is now dedicated to leading an independent wealth management firm providing institutional quality investment management and integrated financial planning, with an intimate client experience possible only at a boutique firm.

As a Chartered Financial Analyst, Jill is a member of the CFA Institute and the Boston Society of Securities Analysts. Jill is also a Certified Financial Planner™ and an Accredited Domestic Partnership Advisor

(ADPA™). Jill holds an MBA from the Yale School of Management and a BA in French from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Jill and her two sons live in Brookline and Orleans, MA.

Areas of Expertise:

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Jill's involvement in the local arts community has included the Advisory Board of A.R.T., the Board of Overseers of the Boston Conservatory, and the Board of Directors of Opera Boston. As a member of the Women President's Organization, Jill is also committed to mentoring and advancing women owned businesses in the Boston area. In her free time she is an avid baseball mom and can sometimes be found as a stand-in third base coach at her son's Little League games.