

IT ISN'T EASY BALANCING YOUR PERSONAL NEEDS WITH THOSE OF YOUR MARRIAGE. BUT COUPLES WHO DEAL WITH THEIR DIFFERENCES BY WORKING AS A TEAM FIND THAT GIVING IN A LITTLE GETS THEM A LOT IN RETURN.

BY CYNTHIA HANSON

yours, mine, **OURS**

When my husband's favorite aunt passed away shortly before our wedding, she left him some framed posters of Impressionist paintings. Aaron and I were setting up our first apartment, and he said he wanted to hang them in our kitchen and living room. I didn't respond, but inwardly I balked. I have nothing against Monet, Manet and company—I just don't like posters of any great art. So I brooded. Our home was our space, I told myself, and the decor should reflect both our tastes. And I worried that if I kept quiet to please him, I'd end up wimping out for the rest of our marriage.

My solution? I spoke up, suggesting that we not put anything on the walls or buy furniture unless we both liked it or, at the very least, one of us didn't object. Aaron agreed,

and we started applying the mutual-approval rule to other issues, big and small—how much money we saved every month, which friends we had over for dinner and whether we drank white wine or red. That eliminated surprises and conflicts, and we became closer. For 16 years neither of us has been caught off guard by, say, the purchase of a 60-inch HDTV or the arrival of in-laws for the weekend.

Our approach is just what the experts advise. In a healthy relationship spouses assert themselves and then strike a deal. “Clear, appropriate boundaries are vital to the long-term functioning and intimacy of a marriage,” says Stephen J. Betchen, a marital therapist in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and author of *Intrusive Partners—Elusive Mates* (Routledge). Couples need

to draw two lines: an internal one between husband and wife, and an external one between the spouses and outside influences, whether it’s relatives, friends or colleagues. “The first allows you to preserve your individuality and follow your dreams, and makes you more interesting to each other,” Betchen says. “The second strengthens you as a couple and helps you withstand the inevitable pressures that every marriage faces.”

It may seem counterintuitive, but setting individual boundaries will help you work better as a team. You’re also setting an example for your kids, who will learn that negotiating compromises is the best way to overcome problems with their friends and future partners. That’s the message Aaron and I are

trying to send to our 6-year-old, Eric, when I stay on terra firma at the amusement park while they ride the roller coaster. “By seeing that Dad won’t pressure Mom into doing something that bothers her, he’ll realize he doesn’t have to do it either,” says Betchen. “That gives him a stronger sense of self and encourages him to think independently.”

Need more team spirit in your marriage? We asked experts to pinpoint the areas where couples often collide and to offer advice on smoothing things out.

money squabbles

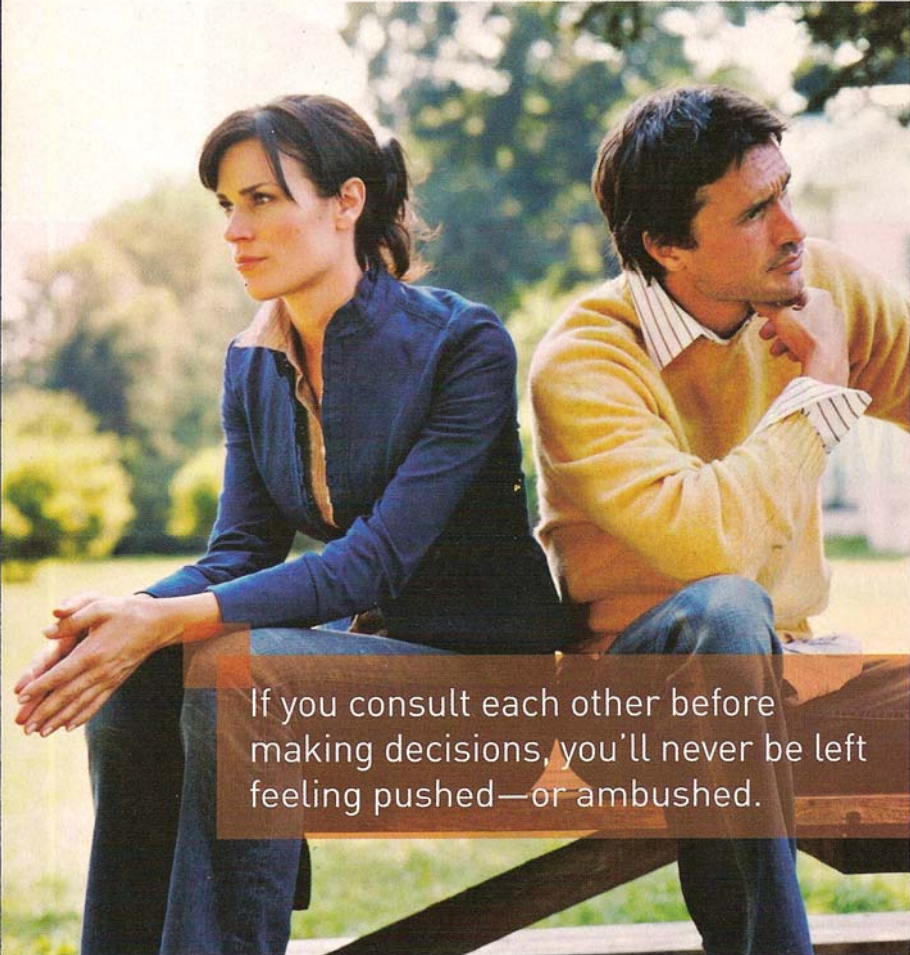
CONFLICT ZONE This is an emotionally charged subject that’s bound to create sparks. While we’re all struggling to stay within our budgets, few couples have identical spending habits and are simpatico on everything from grocery bills to investment strategies. In fact, fights over money are one of the main reasons couples seek counseling.

KEEPING THE PEACE Betchen advises couples to stop thinking as individuals (“It’s my paycheck, so I’ll spend it as I please!”) and start thinking like a team (“How should we manage our finances so we can retire early?”). Household income is joint marital property, no matter who earns it. “When one spouse tells the other, ‘I don’t want you to spend my money,’ it’s a huge red flag for a dominance problem,” Betchen says. Keep track of costs to see where you can cut back; then set an amount that each of you can spend every month as you wish. Agree that major purchases will be a joint decision. If you’re at odds over how to save for college and retirement, consult a financial planner.

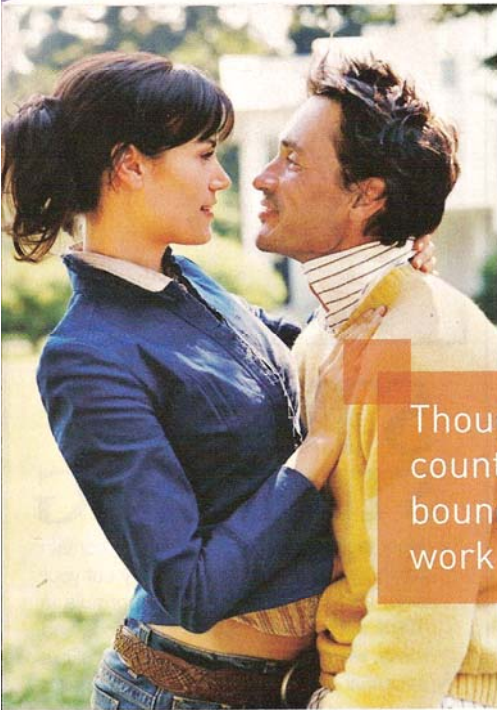
trouble with in-laws

CONFLICT ZONE Even if you genuinely like each other’s families, you may disagree about what makes for a cozy relationship versus one that’s stifling. Maybe you blab to your mom about disagreements over disciplining the kids, and he feels betrayed. Or he invites his parents over for dinner—putting you in the kitchen—every Sunday.

(continued)



If you consult each other before making decisions, you’ll never be left feeling pushed—or ambushed.



KEEPING THE PEACE Priority goes to your spouse, not your parents. “It’s fine for you to be emotionally close, but you must keep parents outside your marital relationship—and that can be tricky,” says Jane Adams, Ph.D., a social psychologist in Seattle, and author of *Boundary Issues* (John Wiley & Sons). To prevent arguments and hurt feelings, she advises, don’t criticize your spouse when talking to your parents or in-laws, and don’t let them criticize him, either.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, setting boundaries will help you work better together.

When raising in-law problems with your spouse, do it tactfully. (“I love having your parents here, but it’s hard to do

things with the kids and prepare a big meal. How about cutting back to twice a month?”) “That way it won’t sound like you’re blaming anyone,” says Janet Taylor, M.D., a Family Circle Advisory Board member and clinical instructor of psychiatry at Harlem Hospital-Columbia University in New York City. And play fair. If he cuts back his parents’ visits for you, do the same for him by, for example, agreeing that your folks can’t stop by without calling first.

disorder in the house

CONFLICT ZONE You keep everything in its place; he drops dirty clothes on the floor and leaves half-full glasses in the den. When you clean up after him, he says you’re invading his space.

KEEPING THE PEACE First, understand that “some people need a neat environment to function effectively and feel in control, while others see home as a place where they can let everything go,” says

A background image for a Scrubbing Bubbles advertisement. It shows a close-up of blue square tiles with a white grout. A thick, white, bubbly foam is being applied to the tiles, creating a diagonal streak across the frame. The text 'Grip It and Rip It!' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image, following the path of the foam.

Grip It and Rip It!

Dr. Taylor. You and your spouse may never see eye to eye, but you can end on-going space wars. Distinguish between common areas (kitchen, living room, master bedroom) and private ones (your office, a corner of the basement, closets). Then agree to reduce clutter in shared areas while reserving the right to be sloppy on your own turf—no questions asked. For example, he won't scarf down chips in bed, and you'll stop going into his closet and hanging up his clothes.

downtime disputes

CONFLICT ZONE Sure, leisure time is great for bonding, and vacations for recording priceless digital moments. But what relaxes you makes him antsy, and vice versa. You like sleeping in, he's up at dawn; you prefer fine dining and nice hotels while he likes campfire cooking and sleeping under the stars.

KEEPING THE PEACE Start taking turns making decisions on how you spend your

downtime, whether it's weekends or a vacation—and be a good sport when your spouse is calling the shots. "It shouldn't be a big deal not going to your favorite restaurant or the destination of your dreams," Betchen says. "The point is to get away from the daily grind and enjoy quality time together, which builds intimacy." Even better, try to agree on activities and places that appeal to you both. And be adventurous—use your leisure time to try doing something new together, like windsurfing or wine tasting. You'll share some thrills and maybe even discover a new passion you can pursue as a couple.

friendship flaps

CONFLICT ZONE You've both got close buddies to lean on. Problem is, you're not wild about each other's friends and get into arguments about who to spend time with and how often.

KEEPING THE PEACE Married couples must negotiate and compromise to main-

tain friendships. Agree to a set number of nights per month that you'll spend with others. That includes people you see on your own—whether it's poker night with your girlfriends or sports night with his fellow jocks—as well as couples you invite over or go out with for, say, dinner and a movie. And if your husband complains that you set things up only with your friends, remind him that he's free to make arrangements too. "He needs to take responsibility if he wants to even things out," Betchen says.

Adams has a few other words of advice. While it's normal to vent to friends about how your spouse drives you crazy, watch what you say. It's one thing to gripe about the way he procrastinates but quite another to complain about his lagging libido. "Never disclose anything that would be embarrassing—that boundary is absolute," says Adams. "Your loyalty is to your spouse, and both of you should make sure the other always feels safe." ●

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