

The Art of Negotiating Household Tasks

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The Rules Have Changed

It could be said that to have a successful marriage in today's society where both partners in the marriage or committed relationship have many different responsibilities, a couple has to learn to negotiate everything: the household tasks, money, parenting, sex, etc. In the 1950s, marital roles were more clearly defined. The role of the woman was often to raise the children, prepare and cook the meals and do most of the household chores while the role of the man was to work and earn the family income. When two people got married, they knew what they were signing up for. In today's world, however, the rules for having a successful marriage have changed. Everything in a marriage has to be negotiated.

A significant problem for many couples, though, is that they don't effectively negotiate the responsibilities in their marriage and then fall into marital roles that were given to them by their families of origin and that don't work in meeting the challenges of today's demanding lifestyles. Many women still take care of the lion's share of the household tasks and childrearing activities even though they, like their husbands, are working full-time. Today, the dual expectations for equality and equity in a committed relationship require greater emphasis on negotiating household responsibilities that can foster mutual satisfaction and a sense of partnership.

An Unrelenting Dilemma

When learning to live with someone else in a committed relationship or in a new marriage, one of the unrelenting, day-to-day realities is getting all of the household tasks done to the satisfaction of both parties. The completion of household tasks can be the source of much conflict in a relationship or it can be the expression of effective partnership.

If couples don't have an effective and satisfying way to negotiate their household responsibilities, they can stumble along for quite some time, never quite feeling "on the same page." Household activities can start to occur like the chocolates on the fast moving conveyor belt for Lucy in the now famous "I Love Lucy" show as she attempted to put them individually in boxes. As the conveyor belt accelerated, many of the chocolates ended up on the floor. The lack of planning and alignment around completing

household responsibilities can lead to resentments and regrets, on-going conflicts, accusation, blame, defensiveness and frustration. Patterns of interactions are created that may last for years. With a mutual commitment to equity, equality and effectiveness, a couple does not have to put up with any of this. My wife, Martha, and I discovered this about four years into our marriage.

Our Breakthrough in Teamwork

Martha and I got married in 1974 right at the height of the feminist movement in the United States. We were introduced to a whole host of writers who were espousing equal rights for women at home and in the workplace. These ideas influenced our relationship. We recognized that our marriage was not going to look like the ones our parents had when we were growing up in the 1950s. At first, we experienced confusion, bewilderment and ineffectiveness in our roles and conflict over who was going to do what. We knew, however, times were changing, we loved each other and we wanted things to work.

Martha and I fell into fairly typical roles at first. She took care of cleaning the house and cooking while I took care of home maintenance and money. The first real crisis occurred when Martha announced to me that she wanted to manage the household finances. I found myself quite upset, annoyed and threatened at first. Growing up, I had watched my father take care of that aspect of life. Martha was upsetting the applecart and I was not at all sure how this was going to work out.

The next reordering of household tasks in our marriage occurred about three to four years into our married life when I was a graduate student at The University of Connecticut and Martha was working for the City of Hartford. We lived in a five-room apartment in Hartford and the household chores were not consistently getting done. We had no clear system of expectations around our roles and responsibilities and this situation led to bickering and arguments. Finally, we both knew we had to talk this out. When we actually started talking, we found we were equally frustrated, angry and judgmental about what was not getting done and who was not doing it! We were both thinking: What is he/she expecting of me? That's his/her job! Why isn't he/she just getting it done!

In our first real attempt to allocate our household tasks, we struggled but we managed to come up with a system of negotiating all of our household responsibilities that we have returned to many times as our circumstances and roles in our marriage have changed in over thirty years together. This single achievement has made one of the greatest differences to the fulfillment and longevity of our marriage! We were committed to equality and fairness to which we added the essential ingredient of choice. Without the experience that each of us had choice in the matter, nothing was really going to work to sustain our partnership in this area. With choice in the equation, though, the successful negotiation of household chores led to teamwork, workability and effectiveness in managing these unrelenting household activities.

The art of negotiating household chores starts with a commitment to teamwork, workability and effectiveness. You and your partner simply need a piece of paper, a pen, and time set aside to talk to each other. If you follow the following guidelines for negotiating household activities, you may find yourselves with a lot more time, space and energy to do all the other things you love!

Align on Important Values in the Negotiation Process

Set aside an hour or two to accomplish this activity. One of the first things you can do is to align on what is important to both of you in the process and in the agreements you make. For instance, it may be important to you that the arrangement is “win-win,” in other words, that you both have the experience of being satisfied. If either one of you is not satisfied with the process or outcome, the negotiation is not complete. Also, it will most likely be important to you that the arrangement you negotiate is fair and equitable. Since there will be no external basis on which to judge fairness, you need rely on your intuitive sense that the commitments you both make are indeed fair. One additional requirement may be that you both experience having a choice in the matter. A discussion of values, such as satisfaction, fairness and equality at the beginning of the process is an important first step.

Write Down Every Household Task You Can Think Of

Next, write down every household task you can think of that has to be completed around the house. For instance, the list may include taking care of the money, doing the dishes, doing the laundry, taking care of the cars, dusting, cooking, feeding the dog, etc. Put each discreet activity on one list. You might be surprised that the list you come up with is shorter than you thought and that you both know what needs to be done around the house to have your lives run smoothly together.

Agree on What’s Involved in Each Household Task

After you have made the complete list of household tasks, talk with each other about what is involved in completing each task and what a completed task looks like. You may find that this arena is where you have the greatest differences of opinion. For instance, in the 1970s, I washed the dishes differently than Martha did. Although we recognized that we did things differently, we were able to agree on what “clean dishes” looked like. For some tasks you might also need to negotiate how often some activities are to be performed in the home. My wife wanted one of us to vacuum twice a week, while I was happy with vacuuming only once a week. Once you agree on what each household task involves, take turns choosing household tasks.

Take Turns Choosing Household Tasks

Start with a flip of a coin if you need to. Take turns looking at your list and choosing an activity that you will be completely responsible for. You choose one household task and then your partner chooses one. Choose another and have your partner choose again. It is important that each of you have the freedom to choose whatever you want to choose with the understanding that, if you choose an activity, it will be your responsibility to regularly complete that household task to your mutual satisfaction. Toward the end of the process, you may notice that there are several tasks that neither of you want to do. That is OK. Take some additional time, break down what is involved and then come up with a negotiated settlement. You may find that you can do this with relative ease. And remember, you can always hire someone to do any of these activities and, if you have children, you can involve them too!

Make Agreements

One of the things you may notice in the negotiation process is that you may tend to choose activities that conform to sex role stereotypes. For instance, every time Martha and I have previously negotiated our household tasks, Martha has chosen cooking while I have chosen taking care of the lawn and the trash. The important aspect was that we were both happy with the agreed-upon arrangement.

It works to agree that neither of you will tell your partner how to do their household tasks as long as what gets accomplished leaves you both satisfied. Of course, if either one person completes a household activity and the result does not meet the agreed upon criteria, the other person has the right to object or complain. Martha and I adopted a very useful rule in our marriage: Each of us has the right to complain only when the other person is not fulfilling an explicit agreement that we have previously negotiated.

Having Time and Space

You may find that the nice part about negotiating household activities in this way is that much of your day-to-day bickering and complaining about what is not getting done clears up. Expectations will be clarified and you will find yourselves more satisfied with how things are going around the house. If there is a problem, you will get to the problem much faster. Sometimes one of you will not do what you agreed to do. If your arrangement is not working, you can renegotiate. Over time, you will find yourselves able to negotiate these activities with greater ease. Whenever one of you says you will be responsible for an activity, the other person can be fairly certain it will get done.

Martha and I have come back to this way of negotiating household activities time and time again throughout our marriage, particularly when major events have occurred, such

as the birth of our three children, a change of jobs or a move to a new home or a new city. This process of negotiating what needs to be done has always left us with the experience of teamwork in our marriage. It has allowed us to focus on other aspects of our lives (careers, family, traveling, etc.) and on what's important to us in our relationship. If you follow these guidelines, you too will infuse your relationship with possibility, partnership and passion!

A Curious Final Thought: Why No One Else Ever “Sees” the Trash

One of the choices I made almost twenty-five years ago in my relationship with my wife was that I would be responsible for taking out the trash. I like to take out the trash. I do it regularly now every Monday morning. When I walk into a room, I often notice how much trash there is in the wastebasket. If I notice that a wastebasket is full, I automatically, without thinking about it, empty the trash into the bigger trash basket in the kitchen. When I notice that kitchen basket is full, I tie up the plastic trash bag with one of those little metal “wire things” and I put the trash bag in the trash bin outside. I do this all the time.

One day not too long ago, however, I became curious: Why is it that no one else in my household ever does this activity spontaneously? In other words, why does it seem that no one in my house ever “sees” the trash? Routinely, other members of my family walk right past a full wastebasket and rarely empty it. It appears that they do not even see the full wastebasket or what needs to be done. Sometimes, they will attempt to put something else in an already overflowing and bursting kitchen wastebasket. Why don't they just tie it up and take it outside to the trash bin?

It occurred to me that no one empties the trash because they don't see the trash in the same way I do. When I see a full trash basket, I am “called” into action to empty it. I realized that I see the trash, because I “am” a commitment to “take out” the trash, a choice I made almost thirty years ago. A long time ago, I defined myself as The-Person-Who-Will-Take-Care-Of-The-Trash. As a result, the trash occurs for me differently than for the rest of my family. Knowing this makes it possible to let go of any resentment or irritation I have with other family members.

For Martha, the analogous situation is doing the laundry. In the early stages of our marriage, Martha committed to take care of washing and drying the clothes. She has completed this task regularly and responsibly for years. She is The-Person-Who-Will-Take-Care-Of-The-Laundry. From time to time, she asks me to do it and I do. On a regular basis, though, I never “see” the laundry as something that I need to do. I do see it as something that needs to be done, but it never occurs to me to do it! Why? I have never chose to do it. Martha, my partner, did.

