

# Book Financial Infidelity

## Seven Steps to Conquering the #1 Relationship Wrecker

Bonnie Eaker Weil  
Hudson Street Press, 2008

### Recommendation

She rushes to the mailbox to intercept the credit card statement and make sure that the incriminating information remains confidential. He receives a nice bonus check but blows it all at a bar after work. Lying to a partner about money is all too common. Bonnie Eaker Weil, Ph.D., uses her 30 years of therapeutic experience to present a compelling study of financial deception and its impact on relationships. Attitudes toward money – even spending habits – are shaped during childhood. The trick is understanding them. Weil says adults who lack insight about their attitudes tend to perpetuate destructive behaviors that can harm their relationships. *BooksInShort* believes that almost anyone can benefit from Weil’s advice. She’s right on the money.

### Take-Aways

- Money is a leading cause of strife in relationships.
- Money arguments often cover deep-seated emotional and behavioral issues.
- To heal your relationship’s financial issues, learn to have open, “Smart Heart” conversations and take these seven important steps:
- One: Establish a unified front by knowing and sharing the facts of your finances.
- Two: Balance the fiscal power in your partnership; never use money for control or abuse.
- Three: Understand the attitudes toward money you learned in childhood.
- Four: If you have an unhealthy attachment to money, recognize and resolve it.
- Five: Decide that money will not ruin your romance. Deal honestly with fiscal issues.
- Six: Reaffirm, prioritize and, if need be, repair your relationship with your partner. Sever your old ties with money to clear the way for love and intimacy.
- Seven: Exercise constant vigilance to prevent “financial infidelity” from reinfecting your relationship.

### Summary

#### Looking Past the Symptoms

Financial infidelity is the great cover-up. Millions of people in committed relationships wage fierce battles about money, unaware that their real issues are love, trust, intimacy and communication. Partners compensate for those missing elements by engaging in power struggles over money and possessions. Learning to talk about money is extraordinarily difficult, but partners who master this skill can repair and strengthen their bond. Relationships often move through stages of “euphoria,” “magical thinking,” “power struggle,” “transition” (deciding to stay together or not), “breaking up” or “making up,” “reromanticizing” and “real and lasting love.” To build your relationship, learn to have “Smart Heart” conversations based on openly expressing your feelings, and showing deep interest in and respect for your partner’s feelings as well.

“In study after study conducted on reasons for marriage distress, money is consistently named as one of the top two sources of conflict.”

To keep fiscal fallout from destroying your relationship, follow this seven-step approach:

#### Step 1: “Calculate the Cost”

In healthy relationships, couples must deal with the challenges that arise after the initial “hormone-induced euphoria” begins to dwindle, but many couples would rather engage in denial or “magical thinking.” They want to perpetuate the notion that their relationship is perfect so they can avoid the hard work it takes to create honest, open communication. People who avoid discussing money are unwilling to face the realities of their financial situations. They don’t want to examine their spending habits or try to understand the emotional factors that shape their view of money. To establish a unified front, you and your partner should:

- **Look at your total financial picture** – List all of your assets and liabilities. Leave emotions and accusations out of the discussion. Just deal with the numbers.
- **Create a budget** – Know where your money goes each month. A realistic budget can uncover the spending patterns that cause friction and ignite arguments.
- **Chart your dreams and goals** – Whether you’re in a serious dating relationship or married with children, this important exercise reveals your values and priorities. Use a chart to reflect your five-year objectives. One partner may want a big home or a luxury car; the other may be more conservative, and prefer to save or invest. This exercise will improve communication and create more realistic, shared expectations.

“Too many couples are torn apart over a power struggle rooted in money and materialism.”

If you and your partner are committed to curing financial infidelity, you should:

- Avoid using money as a weapon and deal with your emotional issues instead.
- Listen carefully to each other's words and reserve judgment.
- Be willing to change and abandon destructive spending behaviors.
- Try to understand each other's motivation; never assume the worst about one another.
- Agree to review budgets every week to make sure you are meeting your mutual goals.

## Step 2: “Examine Your Power Dynamic”

Issues about money and power inevitably surface in every relationship. Ironically, the characteristics that initially attract individuals – such as a sensible approach to saving – can become major points of contention. Even partners who share money styles – two free spenders, for instance – can eventually experience problems as their roles evolve. How people handle money issues helps define their relationships. The situation has become even more complicated as women's earning power has increased. Many women have become their families' primary breadwinners. One study suggests that people who perceive themselves as powerful tend to take more risks. This may cause significant strife during a crisis when lack of preparation and hasty decisions can be disastrous. Individuals commonly use power to manipulate and control each other, but the possibility for physical, mental and emotional abuse is greater when the balance of power is lopsided. An abusive partner who uses money as a weapon may:

- Not allow you to spend money on basic needs, such as health care.
- Try to convince you that certain expenditures are unnecessary or indulgent.
- Promise to buy you a birthday or anniversary gift, and not follow through.
- Blame you for financial problems or cause you to doubt your ability to handle money.
- Insist on having final approval of every purchase or expenditure.

“When it comes to talking about money, most people experience shame, guilt, abandonment and fear – usually a legacy from their childhoods.”

Establish the following “fair fight” ground rules before engaging in a money discussion:

- Set up a specific time with your partner. Don't let your partner ignore your request.
- Agree to take a timeout if the discussion becomes too emotional. Avoid fights.
- Focus on the issues and on your mutual objectives. Pay attention to the conversation.
- Be honest but not hurtful. Weigh your words carefully.
- Validate each other's statements. Reframe them. Don't be condescending.
- “Never use money as a punishment or reward.”

## Step 3: “Divest Yourself of the Past”

The positive and negative messages about money that you received growing up determine your attitudes. Were your parents generous or did they fight about money? Were you denied toys or overindulged? Did your parents and grandparents emphasize the importance of saving or did they live for the moment? These childhood influences significantly shape not only your financial attitudes but also your choice of a partner. People are attracted to someone who fits a preconceived image formed many years ago, someone they believe can heal “childhood wounds.” Although your family legacy affects your “money interactions,” you can minimize the negative fiscal impact of life's most significant occurrences, including marriage, a new baby, loss of employment, divorce, injury, illness or death. Create a chart that lists various money traits – for example, saver, risk-taker, worrier or hard worker – and place your family members in those categories. Understanding your family history will help you communicate with your partner. To avoid stepping on emotional landmines, take these hints:

- Embrace change rather than fearing it. Use life's transitions to strengthen your bond.
- Applaud your partner for making changes with a positive impact.
- Tell your partner if something triggers an old feeling.
- Be conscious of your partner's family legacy and outlook.

## Step 4: “Break Up with Your Money”

Spending secretly, refusing to acknowledge debt or obsessing about the joint checking account are among the ways partners exercise control or create distance through money. Many couples mistakenly believe that money disputes are ruining their connection. The reality is that money problems are symptoms of deeper issues. Breaking money's hold requires partners to understand the “dynamic between pursuer and distancer.” Pursuers are aggressive, impulsive and passionate. They also can be overbearing and bullheaded. Distancers avoid confrontation. They are careful and sensible, and don't respond well to demands. Pursuers and distancers who are unwilling to compromise can doom their relationships. People become attached to money different ways:

- **“Anxiously attached”** – Not having enough money makes these individuals insecure. They obsess over finances and feel distressed if their partners view things differently.
- **“Avoidantly attached”** – These people try to downplay money's importance. They avoid being emotional about it, but their partners' generous gestures make them uncomfortable.
- **“Emotionally detached”** – These individuals have an unhealthy relationship with money. They may spend wildly, save excessively or do both. This dysfunctional behavior can be indicative of mental illness.
- **“Securely attached”** – These folks have a healthy relationship with money. They value people more than money and understand money's place in their lives. They work well with their partners, and appreciate input and feedback.

“Nothing is more conducive to increased romance than learning how to get pleasure out of seeing your partner have a good time.”

One exercise that can help you understand your relationship with money is to pretend for one weekend that you have none. Watch TV instead of renting a movie. Cook a meal instead of ordering a pizza. Acknowledge and share with your partner the feelings that surface when you can't do something that requires money. Monitor your emotions and examine your priorities.

“Practicing financial fidelity can make you wealthy in...love and in your bank account.”

Couples who believe that money has damaged their relationships irreparably may even benefit from trying trial separations, temporary breakups of six to eight weeks. Time apart can help partners appreciate each other and rekindle romantic sentiments. If divorce becomes inevitable, the contributing financial issues to address may include excess expenditures, covert buying, concealed cash and tax complications. Prenuptial and postnuptial agreements can ease difficult transitions and help resolve some conflicts.

### Step 5: “Define the Currency of Your Relationship”

Once you identify and root out negative behaviors and patterns that poison your relationship, you can build trust, love and intimacy by redefining your goals. Couples who share similar values, and emphasize family and friends rather than possessions tend to be happier. Self-indulgence and jealousy generate negative energy. Focus instead on the good things in your life and be thankful for your blessings. Be grateful that you can put food on the table. Express appreciation for your partner every day. The process of reaffirming your relationship should include these elements:

- **Be informed about your monetary standing** – Know what's in the bank, and how and where your money is invested. You should feel comfortable discussing money with your partner.
- **Welcome change and don't procrastinate** – Be excited about moving to a more-connected place with your partner.
- **Decide that money will not ruin your relationship** – Promise to stay together and work on your problems. Negotiate and compromise.
- **Always be honest** – Be upfront if you've stumbled financially. Deceit erodes trust, which is the key component in a committed relationship.
- **Prioritize your relationship** – It's number one.

### Step 6: “Refinance Your Relationship”

Many couples fear that their battles over money have permanently scarred their relationships. They believe that restoring the romance and intimacy of their early years together is impossible. But committed partners can rediscover loving feelings through patience and commitment. The first step is to decide not to hold grudges. In fact, people harbor ill will to protect themselves from hurt. They fear intimacy and the risks involved in repairing a relationship. Instead of clinging to past injustices, focus on your partner's positive traits and characteristics. Put your partner's needs ahead of your own. Spend at least a few minutes with each other every day. Share meals. Take walks together. You can put the romance back in your relationship by trying these tips:

- **Have fun and laugh** – Go ice-skating, play at a water park or roll around in the grass.
- **Touch and cuddle** – Physical contact stimulates the release of pleasurable hormones.
- **Remember what attracted you to each other** – Recreate those feelings and situations.
- **Don't neglect your appearance** – Looking good will help you feel good.
- **“Do what works – not what you think is ‘fair’”** – Forget “tit for tat” thinking.
- **“Say goodbye to old relationships with money”** – Be committed to each other.

### Step 7: Invest in Your Future

Don't become complacent even when your relationship is on track. Always be aware of triggers that can spark old behavior. Don't assume that your partner can read your mind. Speak up without being aggressive or judgmental. Don't let disagreements escalate into harmful arguments. Recognize the positives, consider your partner's perspective, and carefully balance the use of “influence” or power in your relationship. Be honest about what you want and your mutual goals. “Having a good relationship is a skill” you can learn with practice, but you need flexibility, willingness to change, hard work and love. Remember all you have invested in healing your relationship with your partner – and with your money.

### About the Author

**Bonnie Eaker Weil**, Ph.D., has specialized in relationship therapy for 30 years and is the author of several books, including *Make Up*, *Don't Break Up* and *Can We Cure and Forgive Adultery?*

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