



SAGE ADVICE FROM A FAMILY MEDIATOR

Jack Ellis on how to split-proof your relationship

Illustrations by Michael Weldon

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Let me introduce myself: I'm the go-between guy during break-ups – for seven years I've helped ex-partners negotiate child-custody plans or divide property. So I have a unique perspective on the problems that lead to partnerships collapsing because, unlike marriage counsellors, I don't see couples while they're still together, trying to make things work – I see them picking through years of emotional debris after calling it quits. And I notice the same splintered stories sticking through the skin again and again. This story isn't about nailing those first 10-texts-a-day, spanked-buttocks-on-kitchen-bench months of a new relationship. It's about that other kind of smorgasbord – long-term commitment. I'm not saying some relationships aren't bad for you, but there are people who really want to stay in theirs and can't seem to make it work. Here's my breakdown of the problems that come up in almost every mediation session I run, and tips to avoid ending up negotiating Splitsville.



THE DEAL-BREAKER

Over-committing to debt

People often go into bigger debt to enjoy a bigger home. But, in most cases, the nicer your house, the less time you can afford to spend in it. I see a recurring pattern, particularly after the arrival of a child.

I imagine the conversation beginning in a "cosy" flat (cosy in the real estate agent sense of the word):

1. "I think it's important for a child to have a yard."
2. Couple investigates loans for a house – not enough income.
3. Mum returns to full-time work. Child starts full-time day care.
4. Couple buys (almost) dream house: "At least it has a backyard." But they're under pressure between work and home life, and there's barely any change left after paying the mortgage.
5. Financial stress leads to fights, often about little things: "I said *tasty* cheese!"

We can't afford edam!"

6. One partner (usually Dad) starts staying back at work to avoid fights. Mum resents Dad not being around to help with the kid stuff. Weeks of serious fights ensue. Then months. 7. Couple separates. Then financial problems double – now they need to pay for two households, while child longs for the old life in the little flat.

It's bleak, I know. But I can't count the number of times that I've heard a version of this story. And it's backed up by the Relationships Australia/Credit Union Australia 2011 Relationships Indicators Survey, which found financial stress is the number-one reason for relationship breakdowns.

THE RELATIONSHIP SAVIOUR

Sarah Riegelhuth, who wrote *Get Rich Slow*, recommends keeping

your mortgage to about two-and-a-half times your combined annual income. "So if you and your partner earn \$180K combined, borrow no more than \$450K," she says. "Being conservative now means you can still have a life outside of paying down the home loan." Riegelhuth also advises still setting aside regular cash savings for support in tough times. "Use a mortgage offset account to hold this money, that way your savings are also reducing the interest on your home loan."

If you haven't got kids but might one day, factor in how leave and part-time work might affect your budget. Nappies don't cost much, but time off work does, and the last thing you want when a baby comes along are a bunch of unpayable bills to fight about.



THE DEAL-BREAKER Bungling your baby time

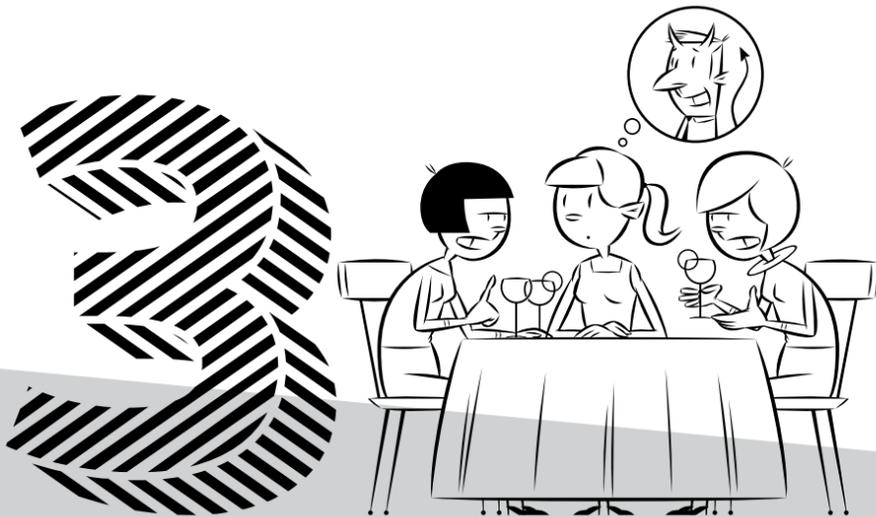
As a mediator and father of a two-year-old myself, I know nothing rocks the boat like a baby coming aboard. The life-or-death attention tiny humans require is all consuming, and it upturns your previous priorities. A study by the University of Denver, US, found 90 per cent of new parents experience a decline in relationship satisfaction after a child's birth. And, according to the University of Michigan, US, a second child may have even more of an impact than the first.

Your sex life also cops a blow, so it's no surprise a Baby Talk survey showed less than one-quarter of new parents were sexually satisfied. "Sex? Are you serious?" (Chunk of baby vomit falls from tired mum's armpit onto her fetid ugg boot.)

THE RELATIONSHIP SAVIOUR

I'm not suggesting you sit on the porch with a slingshot to target passing stalks, because squeezing a baby out can be the best thing the two of you ever do. But when your screaming, shitting, chundering angel comes along, remember a happy, stable relationship is important for your child. Yes, more than washing that leaning tower of puked-on bedsheets. Wise advice I got from prenatal class: "The best thing a father can do for a newborn is to love its mother." And vice versa.

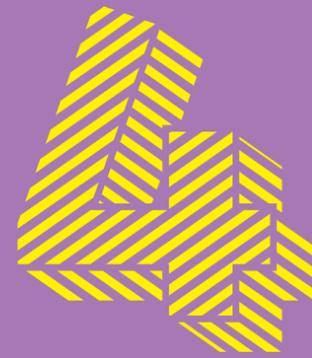
And the sex stuff... Dr Martien Snellen, author of *Rekindling: Your Relationship After Childbirth*, suggests getting back to first base before bumping fuzzies: "You need to learn to hold hands again and how to embrace," he says. "If the hand you are holding feels like a wet fish, that needs to change before anything more [passionate] should be reasonably contemplated."



THE DEAL-BREAKER The "pub chorus"

Ah, good ol' "friendly advice", the prawn cracker of long-term relationships: feels so crunchy and right at first, but often leaves you hungry for something else. One of the biggest things I've learnt from mediation is that it's impossible to fully grasp the inner dynamics of someone else's relationship. And friends aren't magicians or doctors (unless yours are magicians or doctors...). Instead, they're cheerleaders – the ones who unquestioningly barrack for us because we are always on the right side of every partner-partner argument. And in my experience, relationship advice from your friends can make you feel worse about your partner than you did before you and your mates chewed the fat, pushing you to behave towards your partner in ways that can go against your true feelings.

THE RELATIONSHIP SAVIOUR "If your friends are giving out advice that's making you feel worse, it could be because you only tell



THE DEAL-BREAKER The nagging cycle

In 99.9 per cent of the mediations I run, someone – usually the man – blames his partner's nagging. One woman even said, "I guess I did nag, but I thought that's what you're supposed to do." A study of more than 3000 people for the health campaign Everyman found wives, on average, spend two-and-a-half hours a week nagging. The most common subject women nagged their partners about was not helping tidy. Women still do the elephant's share of housework: last year's census showed 1.4 million women do more than

15 hours of chores a week, while only half a million men do the same.

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No one wants to be a nag, and no one wants to get nagged, so how to ensure you don't feel like you're the only one who ever scrubs the dunny? The solution lies in doing some chores together, rather than dividing them evenly, says the *Journal of Family Issues*. "We found that when wives are doing work together with their husbands, they are more

satisfied with the division of labour," says researcher Professor Erin Holmes.

How to ask, not "nag", your partner to dry the dishes while you wash? Psychology expert Dr Alice Boyes says to avoid using "totalising" words like "always" and "never": "You never help with the washing-up"; "You always watch the cricket while I bust a gut". Or give him a specific choice: "Do you want to do the dishes or the bins?" Or, "Do you want to paint the spare room tomorrow or next weekend?"



THE 21-MINUTE BETTER-RELATIONSHIP TRICK

BY MELANIE HEARSE

Wanna try a relationship-strengthening strategy that takes less time than an episode of *Modern Family*? Boffins from Northwestern University, US, got 210 couples to frequently report in over two years on their relationship satisfaction, love, intimacy, passion, commitment and trust, and provide a summary of the worst fight they'd had. Half of the couples then did a writing task that involved thinking about the fight from the perspective of an outsider – let's imagine it's Dr Phil – who wants the best for both of them, using these prompts (try it yourself)...

- What might Dr Phil think about how the skirmish unravelled (eg, why your partner said those nasty things and why you came back even nastier)?
- Could Dr Phil find some good that came from the heated battle?
- For the next four months, try your best to get inside Dr Phil's head when interacting with your partner, especially during these types of fights.

So what happened with the couples who took this on? Although they still fought as often, they were less distressed by the fights and felt more marital satisfaction, while those who didn't do this experienced a dip in satisfaction (which is typical of long-term relationships in general). Pens to the ready...

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them about annoyances and problems," says Carlin Flora, author of *Friendfluence: The Hidden Ways In Which Friendships Make Us Who We Are*. "Women have a habit of co-ruminating – talking endlessly about their problems together, which can cause depression. And research shows depression spreads through friend groups. So give friends a big-picture view by also sharing some stories about your partner's best qualities and the good times you have together."

If you want advice, but your bestie's ladle-full doesn't taste right, broaden the discussion to one on relationships in general, says Flora. "Say something like, 'That's interesting, is that something that's worked for you? Do you think most men are like that?'" This way you'll learn whether it's a case of your friend projecting her own values onto you, or if it's something you really should consider."

The bottom line: trust your own judgement. Unless, as Flora says, more than one friend is repeatedly giving you the same advice: "Sometimes we want so badly to preserve a romantic relationship that we live in denial of a serious problem."



THE DEAL-BREAKER
Inflexible roles

The couples I find hardest to mediate are the ones in which the roles are fixed: when one partner is “the dependable one” and the other is “the dependent one”. “The partner who offers the support will eventually feel ‘no one is there for me. I don’t matter, it’s all about you’,” says Lissy Abrahams, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist at Heath Group Practice in Sydney. “And the

partner in the [emotionally needy] role can feel overwhelmed by being the one with all the problems.” Things can also screw up when something throws that structure off balance. For example: the death of the dependable partner’s parent. Suddenly, that usually supportive partner needs extra emotional back-up, casting both partners into unfamiliar roles. Both end up competing for the “dependent” position and, the result: neither feels supported. (Cue: Adele album.)

THE RELATIONSHIP SAVIOUR “It’s important that both of you are able to take on different roles – be both a support and a supportee to each other,” says Abrahams. How to stay flexible? Ultimately, it comes down to honesty. No matter how strong or dependable you or your partner are, there are times when both of you will feel overwhelmed, and you need to trust your partner enough to let it show. If you’re not used to your partner being vulnerable, push yourself out of your comfort zone to let him lean on you when he needs it. **wh**

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THE DEAL-BREAKER
Home renovations

We all know entertainment is about conflict. So why do you think home-reno shows are so popular? Picture this: you and your partner are living in a nice – albeit a little shabby – home with a warm bed, running water and doors that shut. Now imagine the two of you transported to something that looks like a PNG refugee camp, surrounded by dust and jagged construction materials, a tarp roof. And you’re paying tens of thousands for the privilege. The pressure that I’ve seen renovations put on relationships is immense. Not only is there the stress of living in a construction site, but the inevitable cost blowouts and arguments about how to proceed when things don’t go to plan.

THE RELATIONSHIP SAVIOUR If there’s any possibility of living somewhere else while the reno’s in action, do it, says carpenter Robert O’Keefe. “I’ve done hundreds of kitchen renovations, and I always urge people to go away for a few days because they freak out when they see their beloved home turned into a disaster zone.” Of course, it’s not always possible to leave, especially if you’re doing DIY renos, in which case, “make sure the renovations don’t become the only thing you two talk about,” says Boyes. She also recommends having “rest days” and creating a sanctuary: “Have at least one room that’s free of mess so you can get a break from looking at a half-finished house 24/7.”



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