Medical Xpress

Q&A: Study shows how debt affects relationship quality

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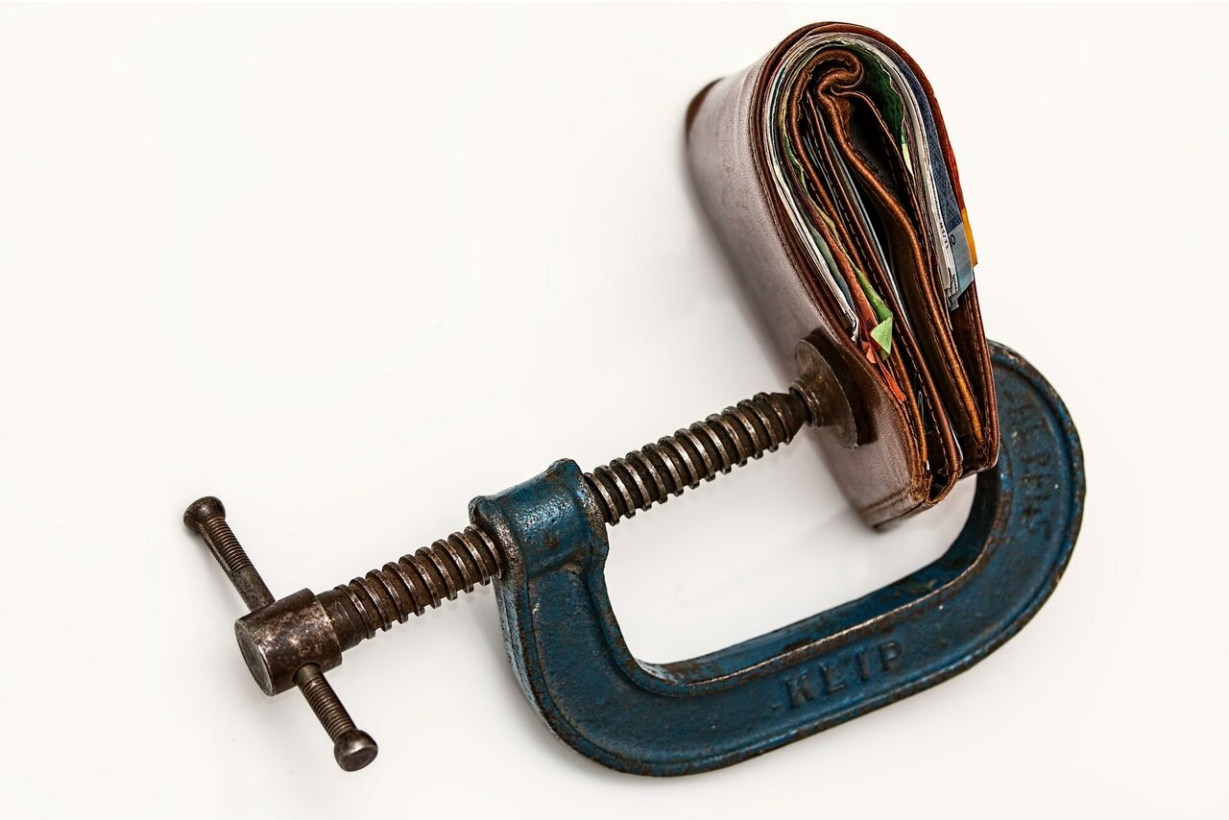

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There are a lot of factors that go into building a successful relationship, and money is one of the key aspects. Researchers have conducted all sorts of studies on how household finances affect a couple's relationship.

But little is known about how debt alone affects a couple's relationship.

That's why Arizona State University's Xing Sherry Zhang and her colleague Fenaba Addo of the University of Wisconsin, Madison decided to study how debt affects the quality of a couple's relationship. The researchers' findings were recently published in the Journal of Family and Economic Issues.

ASU Now sat down with Zhang, an assistant professor in Arizona State University's College of Health Solutions and a public policy demographer, to discuss the study and what debt means for a couple's relationship. Zhang's research focuses on how parent-child relationships shape young adult health from adolescence to adulthood, and how this varies across race, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status.

Question: What are the key findings of your latest study?

Answer: Our study focused on how the state of finances in a household shaped relationship satisfaction among married and cohabitating couples. We found that debt concordance—by that we mean couples who reported the same exact amount of credit card debt—was associated with higher relationship quality. We also found that making joint decisions on purchases, having no arguments related to finances and having fewer economic and material hardships were associated with increased relationship quality. So, we argue that it's important for couples to be on the same page with their finances, including communicating about their finances, so they're aware of the household's financial health.

Q: The study also found that disagreements over financial issues affected the relationship?

A: To examine the link between debt concordance and relationship quality, we measured how often couples argue over financial issues. Overall, we found that disagreements related to financial issues, or couples who argued over financial management practices at least a few times a year, were associated with decreased relationship quality.

Q: Unlike other studies, this study highlights the importance of including objective measures of household finance when assessing relationship quality. What is the difference between objective and subjective measures, and why is it important to differentiate between the two?

A: By objective measures, we mean financial and economic measures, such as levels of credit card debt. But many studies tend to focus on happiness or closeness, relationship expectations, gender rules and attitudes. We don't typically think of objective measures, like your bank statement, predicting relationship satisfaction or relating to a couple's health and well-being. This study looks at that; so, we're addressing a gap that we saw in the literature concerning relationship quality. Subjective measures can lead to very different assessments of the relationship, unlike objective measures that are not associated with individual interpretations.

Q: Did anything surprise you about the study?

A: We were surprised that among couples who reported different levels of debt, 85% had joint bank accounts, and among couples who reported the same levels of debt, 80% had joint bank accounts. This suggests that just because couples share a bank account, they may not be aware of each other's levels of outstanding credit card debt. This is interesting

because credit and banking cards have proliferated, which means it's not always easy to share this information between couples about how much debt there is. What's more, 58% of couples in the study reported having debt, and that's a pretty high percentage. Conditional on having debt, the average amount of debt was about $4,000. Debt is really becoming a part of American society—and that, in turn, shapes the trajectory of economic inequality.

More information: Fenaba R. Addo et al. Debt Concordance and Relationship Quality: A Couple-Level Analysis, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* (2020). DOI: 10.1007/s10834-020-09687-8

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