

EPISODE 907

“DR: If you told me that you had two people who knew that if they sit face to face, it’s too difficult because it’s intimidating and it makes them feel vulnerable or it makes them angry and emailing each other works for them, I would say, ‘more power to you.’”

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:46.7]

FT: How do you talk money with your partner? Welcome to So Money everybody. I’m your host Farnoosh Torabi. If you are in the midst of a financial issue with your loved one, if you're at odds and if money is a leading stress in your relationship, this episode’s for you. Our special guest today is Debra Roberts, she’s a licensed certified social worker who has spent more than 20 years helping clients of her private practice, learn how to communicate more effectively with one another.

She’s worked with couples to improve communication at home, as well as business owners to help them improve engagement in the workplace. We focus a lot today on financial conversations, how to have difficult money talks with your partner and also how to have a better money relationship with yourself.

Welcome to the show, Debra Roberts.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:36.9]

FT: Debra Roberts, welcome to So Money.

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DR: Thank you Farnoosh, glad to be here.

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FT: I'm so glad you're here. You know, I really want to get into some concrete advice for listeners around how to properly communicate about money. Not just in your life as an ambitious human being who wants to accomplish all these financial goals, but in a relationship, you know, it's no secret that so many couples have difficulty talking about money and coming to an agreement around money in their relationship and there's a lot of arguments that can stem from money, differences which can then lead to divorce.

So, you're going to help us just avoid all of that, thank you. Early thank you to that but also, I want to talk about you know, how you got to this place in your career as the go to expert for what you've coined is *The Relationship Protocol: How to talk, diffuse and build healthier relationships*. This is the title of your book but it's also really what summarizes your life's work, is helping people build healthier relationships, whether that is your personal relationship with your partner or a business relationship.

Could you also extend that to just a relationship with yourself? We have relationship with ourselves. Our self-talk can sometimes get us in trouble.

[0:02:52.1]

DR: Absolutely, we have relationships with ourselves and with others in every capacity, every aspect of our lives for sure.

[0:03:02.1]

FT: Really, like I read through your book and I know your work and I know you and it sounds to me like at the end of the day, what is the backbone of a healthy relationship and what makes the relationship protocol work is effective communication.

So, could you be just call this the communication protocol because really, it's all about how we connect and communicate which why aren't we better at it?

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DR: You know, it's so interesting, when I was writing the book, I actually had moments where I thought to myself, "do I really need to write this? Doesn't everybody know it?" Because as you can see when you look at my book, it's so basic, you know, it's almost like "duh, doesn't everybody know that you should be kind and that you don't have to bicker back and forth and you don't have to take it personally?" And you know, simple things like that.

But we don't know that and we see it all the time, we see it on television, we see it in our homes, at the office, people don't know sometimes the basic skills and primarily because they weren't taught that. It's not a course in school. It doesn't happen in a lot of homes.

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FT: It's true and I think, you know, we're going to talk later about how to address all of this with the money component of your relationship but I think in general, I'm thinking about my own relationship with my husband and sometimes when you disagree over things, it is hard to sometimes stop and consciously – you have to be consciously nice sometimes because your instinct maybe to kind of like go at this person.

Because you're so full with emotion.

[0:04:38.2]

DR: Well, first of all, nobody's perfect. I'm certainly not perfect at any of this, but I try really hard and that's all we can ask of anybody. It's a matter of being more relational as they say, so that when I'm having a conversation with my partner or someone I care about, that's also in my head. My thinking shifts towards the relationship and how we are doing, what's happening between us is as important to me as how I'm feeling.

That's the goal of having a difficult conversation. Is it going to be more successful? If my energy is about us and we're on the same team, I'm not going to say things to you that I'm going to regret later if that's my perspective.

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FT: It's such a simple mindset shift, but I think that for me, when I read that in your book, it was like my gosh, I felt like the clouds parted because I was like "yeah, of course." It's less of a conflict to just focus on that common ground that you have that is what you are in this relationship born in the first place.

It's something that I often also hear about when it comes to money conflict in a relationship, make it less about, "well you're a spender, you're not good with money." And make it more about, "what are our goals and how is our behavior, how can our behavior support this goal, right?" Also, it doesn't become personal, it doesn't feel like a personal attack.

[0:06:05.7]

DR: Exactly. That's precisely what I want people to do. I want the orientation of the conversation to be, "we are in this together. How can we accomplish the goal?" This isn't my – I'm in control of this and you're not because that's not going to feel good for either one of us. So, the end result is that we both walk away from this conversation feeling heard, we may not agree but at least, you need to know what's important to me and maybe that will help you to bend a little bit if you're actually listening to me rather than being turned off or defensive.

So, our energy during the conversation is again, how do I want the other person to feel is an orientation toward the other person, the perspective is that during this conversation, they are important, they're as important as I am. I cared about them before we started this conversation as I say, you know?

I always tell this story that many years ago when my now husband was my boyfriend, we were having conversation and he said to me, "you know, you're really defensive or you're giving me that tone," and I got really ticked off and I kind of walked away.

Then I thought to myself, you know, “I really like this guy before he said that to me and I trusted a lot of what he said before he said that. Maybe there’s some validity to what he’s saying.” I think we have to remind ourselves that our partner isn’t necessarily saying something to hurt our feelings and we give them the benefit of the doubt which is part of the model.

If I look at you from the perspective of giving you the benefit to the doubt, then I’m going to be more open to what you’re saying, your intention is not to hurt me, but to have a conversation that’s a difficult topic.

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FT: See, in that scenario, you are practicing your own relationship protocol. You mentioned in the book that sometimes, there’s going to be one partner in the relationship that’s a little bit more invested in saying the right things, having the right mindset, how do you get your other partner onboard when you want to have a difficult conversation about your money? And this is already fraught with emotion and how do you kind of reel in your partner and also get this person to start communicating in an effective impactful way?

Again, without making it about hurt feelings, without hurting feelings, without making the other person feel judged and all the things?

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DR: In those situations, it’s really important to prepare yourself for the conversation because you know you’re going to be challenged. So, if you have a few bullet points that you know you want to bring up and you make sure the timing is good, you don’t have the conversation right before anybody’s going to sleep or they’re running out the door. Ask, “do you have time to talk about this?”

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FT: Totally.

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DR: But it's true. Most of us don't even have that kind of time. So you have to schedule the time to have the conversation.

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FT: I always want to talk about like refinancing the mortgage like right before bed.

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DR: Or you said with margaritas in hand, this conversation.

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FT: But the running joke in my household is that I always like bring up like really serious financial things like right before bed, you know? Or right after a long day. Like, "should we move?"

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DR: Right, everybody does that by the way, you are not alone.

[0:09:16.0]

FT: Should I increase my retirement contributions? Yeah, it's so true. Now, I'd love to explore a little bit more about your personal, I love the story that you have with your husband and like going even further back in time, did you ever feel like there were some kerfuffles in your relationship that you failed at, you know?

Now looking back, you would have done things differently, maybe again around something financial?

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DR: I think that not from a financial perspective and then I can talk about that in a sec but in a relationship perspective, I know that I would get very defensive very usually early on. I felt very protective of myself probably because of other relationships, where I should have been more protective of myself. So, when my husband would talk to me about certain things or bring things to my attention, I really had no interest in hearing what he had to say fully, as fully as I should have.

It really caused a lot of angst between us. Until one day I realized, "I need to figure this out because I'm now the cause of the problems," and I think that's a hard thing to come to terms with when you take a hard look at yourself and you're supposed to be at the time, I don't know that I considered myself the relationship person but I was a therapist.

And I wasn't bringing a lot of self-awareness to the table and it's such a critical part is to be aware, be really present during the conversations, that's why I said having one late at night, just kind of half there, maybe looking at your phone and you know, you have to be 100% present when you're having a difficult conversation and also acknowledge, this is going to be a difficult conversation, let's try to do this carefully.

Let's take it slowly and if it starts to go off the path than we want it to go on, let's bring it back. Let's take a break, be respectful, that type of a thing. In terms of are you asking about money mistakes, is that what -

[0:11:08.2]

FT: Or differences around money, yeah. And that you couldn't for somehow for some reason reconcile or come to an agreement on.

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DR: I came from a family where we didn't know we talk about money and we didn't really focus on saving and then I became a social worker who was more of a service-oriented person than again a money-oriented person.

I think that – and my husband came from a family that was different, they were more saving oriented and they talked about it. So, I didn't want to have a conversation and we didn't have the conversation because if one person refuses, it's hard to have those conversations.

And it really wasn't until a number of years into our marriage and he is not pushy in that way, you know, he gave me space to do and think the way that I needed to think at that point and then at some point down the road, he said, "okay, enough. We really need to change how we're looking at this because this is not a smart way to be."

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FT: Tell us a little bit about maybe a money memory growing up that was really impactful that now as an adult, this is like a captured scene in your childhood that really in some ways, either illustrates, you already mentioned like you didn't really talk about money growing up as a kid, but take us to a scene about that or maybe something that you learned that was really helpful, a conversation that you witnessed, anything that was instrumental in the way that you think about money growing now as an adult?

[0:12:39.1]

DR: I can tell you that it was so – money was so not discussed that when I was filling out my college applications and I went to my father because they have the financial piece, he refused to fill it out and give it back to me. He said, "complete the applications and then give it to me, I'll do the financials, have it in an envelope ready to go and you'll mail it."

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FT: Yeah.

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DR: I mean, that's how private and not discussed it was. It wasn't even just not a topic that was discussed. He wasn't going to talk about it intentionally. And I still don't know why and he's not around for me to ask but that definitely did influence me because I just didn't really think too much about money to be honest. It wasn't a priority because it was never in my space to behave a certain way or in my mindset. I wasn't encouraged, I had great parents but, in this area, I really do feel that they fell short and that's always been a disappointment to me because I was late to the party with saving.

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FT: I think that that's not uncommon even today, parents shield the – at least the – because you know, what is he filling out on that form? His salary, right? Household, financials that you know, if a kid came up to you, if your kid came up to you and said, "Mom, how much do you make?" I mean you might tell him eventually, but it is something that you're maybe not prepared to answer and then you are wondering about, "well, will this become conversation in the lunch room at school?" And I think that traditionally people, at least like older generations, a lot of their self-worth was tied to their net worth, right?

So, if this becomes now public information or maybe your child was expecting a higher number, what does that say about their perception of your work and career and all of that? So, it needs to be a part of a larger conversation and if parents were already not in the mood or in the place to have the conversation, I think that it may be even more difficult.

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DR: I think it does. I think the not sharing the number is common, but because it was intrinsically a part of how my family function it fit in the profile and it encouraged me to just not really, "okay, I guess it is either not important or it is too private, so whatever."

[0:15:04.9]

FT: So, if you are listening to this podcast and you want to have a money conversation with your partner tonight because who knows? Maybe you want to buy a house together, maybe your partner's got some debt, maybe you have some conflict around just how to manage the money in your household and you haven't really talked about money yet and you are kind of nervous to engage the topic, can you give us a quick script, Debra, just like a really easy script sheet for how to prepare and then how to break the ice?

[0:15:36.3]

DR: Absolutely, I would start by acknowledging as I mentioned before, acknowledge that, "hey, this is a difficult conversation for us." It is a sensitive hot topic for most couples or I guess we're talking about couples and a reminder, "let's do this, let's be respectful of each other and start with stating your intention. We want to get along, we don't want to fight with each other, let's make this a positive conversation."

And if you know there is going to be a disagreement, sometimes it's better to have one person talk and state what's going on for them, what their opinion is or what they would like to see happen, let them finish if possible and then the other person can ask them questions respectfully. Nobody has to get too sensitive because the intention is not to be hurtful just to be curious, but you have to be open and curious and very present.

Then the other person can talk about what their opinions are and what they would like to see happen. Again, ask them questions and then see what came out of that. Are their common factors? Are there are areas overlap? Is there such a differing of opinions? What is more important to one of you? Or who has more knowledge of that, what else can you do? Research to that, you are in it together is the key and nobody should feel like they make you feel stupid or uninformed as much as there is opportunity to have a discussion around the tough topic and feel proud of yourself that you are able to do it.

I just want to add more thing to that. That is the framework for having the conversations but also, have a communication perspective. A relationship perspective, so that even if you're

disagreeing, you don't have to feel defensive because you know that how you feel is important to your partner just as how they feel is important to you.

So the connection of we need to pay attention to how my partners reacting to this, I am talking about my opinion and my partners like totally shut them down or getting angry, I am going to stop what I am saying right in that moment because what's happening between us is more important than the conversation than the topic of money. And I am going to say what is going on and they are going to say, "well, I don't like the way you are talking with me," or whatever it is.

And then I am going to check myself and say, "okay, let me try this again." I am not going to get defensive. I am just going to try again because it is a tough topic and it triggers people. So, if you are getting triggered, you have to be able to say, "you know what? I need to take a break." It's everybody taking care of themselves and the other person, not this isn't every man for themselves.

[0:18:05.2]

FT: Is there a benefit to doing some of this communication over email? I know it sounds weird because you are living together and you should be able to talk about things face to face, but maybe even just as a way to set up the expectations for the conversation. Again, this might seem really inappropriate some might say because you should be able to talk to your partner openly but again, this is really sensitive stuff and you want to have the right words. So, what do you think about that?

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DR: I would say that if you told me that you had two people who knew that if they sit face to face it is too difficult because it is intimidating, makes them feel vulnerable or makes them angry and emailing each other works for them, I would say more power to you. I just want people to be talking to each other.

[0:18:55.5]

FT: Yeah, all right.

[0:18:56.6]

DR: So, it wouldn't be the preferred method but there is no judgment here. I want people to be able to have healthy, positive, basic conversations around all topics. I want them to be able to initiate a conversation, resolve their differences. It's just not so complicated as it feels. It's the emotion attach to the topic or the history or the triggers. Like you know, when you interview people you always ask about growing up and the influences that they have and how money makes them feel and all of that.

And now you have an adult sitting across from you as your partner who had that history and that is part of what they're reacting to, not everything but that is some of what triggers us, how we were made to feel or how we understand them or how it scares us? So, we bring that to a conversation and we're present and we are aware of how we are feeling, we can face it together.

Of course, now, we're entering into a territory that it is making me nervous or you know, you seem like you're getting angry and you know you're navigating it as you go and narrating in some ways too.

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FT: What do you think about, Debra, some of the studies out there about gender differences when it comes to communication? So, you know there's so many books and studies on the topic of the gender dynamics and I know like this is a bit of a controversial thing to even say that men and women potentially interpret and think differently when it comes to similar things. I know when I was doing research for *When She Makes More*, I talked to gender experts who were definitely in the camp that generally speaking, you know men and women have a different way of communicating.

Or at least we interpret things differently and that it would behoove if people who are in heterosexual relationships to understand some of those best practices so to speak when it

comes to getting your partner to get on board and like communicating and connecting. And I just wonder in your experience, does that ever come up?

Do you ever think that is even true? Do you think that there is any advice worth giving around that?

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DR: So, I will take it one step further. I will say in all of those relationships whether it's gender related or not, you always have to know who is on the other side of the interaction and how they communicate. So, whether it is a man who just needs bullet points, which you know many men do, then don't give them a whole flowery explanation with 16 paragraphs because all they really want to hear are some of the bullet points.

If you're talking to them, do you know what I am saying? So if there are gender differences, sometimes it is more – that is a little bit of what else you see sometimes between men and women where the life will want to give a full explanation with a lot of details and I watch the husband glaze over sometimes and I'll say to her, "there's nothing wrong with his reaction is but that is how he always reacts to you."

So instead of us criticizing him or giving him a hard time for that, which he should be paying more attention, but she also needs to know who she's dealing with. And if she wants him to listen, she may have to accommodate. It's like talking to your children in different ages, you get different information. So, talking to each other as adults, we have to know who we are talking to. We have to know how to address the conversation sometimes and adapt it, modify it somewhat.

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FT: So, bouncing around a little bit but you know, I'm still thinking about your childhood and money and how has that left you feeling about money today. How would you describe your relationship with money today, Debra?

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DR: Much better than it was. It was definitely something that I didn't think too much about, then I went through a period where it made me uncomfortable because I didn't really know what to do with it and I think once we got our finances settled and in the hands of a good planner, it is a different relationship now. And I am also running a business now whereas before, we were not living hand to mouth but it was a tighter experience when I was doing more non-profit work.

Now that I am working with businesses and having practiced and doing different things, there is more opportunity for saving, which I know you are going to ask me for retirement. That is my goal that is my big goal.

[0:23:36.1]

FT: Your goal is to retire, that's good.

[0:23:37.8]

DR: One day, yes.

[0:23:38.8]

FT: One day.

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DR: Although I love working, I have to say and I am on a mission to get the world to be communicating better. It sounds so corny, but you know I am.

[0:23:48.7]

FT: Well this month, in partnership with our sponsor Chase, we are asking guests on the topic on financial planning, what is one thing that for you Debra equates to financial security, when it

comes to managing your money and financial planning, what's one thing that you attempt to do or do regularly that helps you to feel more secure with your finances?

[0:24:10.4]

DR: Well, I opened up a separate account that I never had before that I used for my business. Before it was a big joint account and that gave me some sense of accomplishment, but also some independence and then I take a percentage of that and the percentage goes into saving, a percentage goes into our home expenses and that has felt like it's given me more control over our finances on a regular basis from my end.

[0:24:40.5]

FT: This is just for yourself? Yeah, I mean it is good to have the autonomy.

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DR: Yeah, well I mean it's not a secret account, you know what I mean?

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FT: Of course, but I think this just sort of feel like you have a little bit of you know, independence.

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DR: I essentially say to myself a salary versus everything is a pooled of money, which is what it was initially.

[0:25:04.8]

FT: Okay, *The Relationship Protocol*, is available everywhere books are sold online. We will be sure to put the link for it on our website. Before we leave though, just one last question and this

is something that I have not asked a lot of guests recently and I don't know why. I think we just get carried away and I forget but this is so important to answer and it goes like this: I am Debra Roberts; I am So Money because?

[0:25:30.2]

DR: I am So Money because I help to transform people's lives in all aspects of their life so they can have richer relationships and healthier communications. How about that?

[0:25:47.4]

FT: I love that. It's so important. It's like you said, it sounds like, "of course I need to." But so few of us actually do this consciously. So, thank you for your work, thank you for making the book so that we can all have access to this. So, in case you are not able to sit down on a couch with Debra one on one, you can at least get her counsel through the book. Thanks so much and hope you have a great summer.

[0:26:11.5]

DR: Thank you, you too.

[END]