



Putting a whole new spin on “let’s make a deal...”

DEBORAH JAFFE/GETTY IMAGES

# The happy- ever- after contract

Remember the hard-core negotiating that went on in *Fifty Shades of Grey*? That’s not kinky, experts say, it’s smart. Here, real couples reveal the terms and conditions that keep their relationships strong and satisfying. By Erin Zammett Ruddy

When one of my book-club friends suggested we jump on the *Fifty Shades of Grey* bandwagon, I was the first to roll my eyes. It’s not that I’m above a less-than-literary trilogy (I’ve been known to wake up from a *Hunger Games* dream screaming, “I volunteer as tribute!”), but the prude in me just wasn’t interested. Spanking? Shackles? No, thank you. Then the 3,000th Christian Grey reference went over my head and I started to feel left out. I gave in and, of course, devoured the book in one weekend. But where other women were finding the sex hot, I liked the contract negotiation. Christian draws up a multi-page agreement—one that requires his and Ana’s signatures on everything from grooming to sleep schedules to (gulp) what part goes where. Debating their “hard and soft limits” ensures that they build

their relationship on an open, honest discussion of their needs, wants, and no-go zones.

Every couple hashes out their own particular deal, and the strongest unions have agreements so smart they fend off the negativity that can build up over years of sharing responsibilities, space, and time. “Discussing your expectations explicitly helps keep you from becoming frustrated and disappointed in your relationship,” says Mira Kirshenbaum, a psychotherapist and the author of *I Love You But I Don’t Trust You*. “If you do this honestly, you avoid one of you eventually saying, ‘I would never have married him if I’d known he wanted X, or wouldn’t agree to Y.’” Yes, contracts work in real life. Take Facebook mogul Mark Zuckerberg. Before his now-wife, Priscilla Chan, relocated to Palo Alto, CA, where he lived, she reportedly insisted on



How much is a little extra shut-eye worth to you?

## The sign of party thinks

name, and the stuff that's flexible, like someday painting his room the colors of the Argentinian flag. The only important thing is that their deal *works for them*, which it does. When Joanna, 35, got married, she and her husband hashed out their bedroom life from the get-go. "If we're not intimate, I worry we're not connecting, and that's not good for either of us," she says. So here are their rules: No more than two days go by without them getting busy, and every time they visit someplace they've never been, they have sex. "We do it within minutes of arriving," Joanna says. "We're fun houseguests!" Ultimately, she says, "having parameters for our sex life ensures that it will always be paramount in our relationship." It's hard to argue with her logic.

There's no doubt that all of this stuff would fall under the hash tag "first-world problems" (see my *Housewives* agreement earlier), but if it matters to you, it matters to the health of your relationship. When they first got married, Allyssa, 35, and her husband made a deal to mesh her tidy ways with his sloppy ones. "He can keep his closet as messy as he wants, as long as it doesn't smell. I don't go in there... ever." She also put little plates around the house for him to dump his junk—"tiny pieces of paper with information written down, buttons,

collar stays, just garbage, really," says Allyssa. As long as his stuff is on the plates, she stays silent. I think it's hilarious that they had to resort to human litter boxes, but who am I to judge?

### 2. Both parties should feel like they "won."

Amy's husband recently left his job as a successful attorney to join a world-touring jazz vocal group. He had her full support—in fact, the life change was part of a new contract between them: His job switch allowed them to move back east, where the 33-year-old mother was able to stay home with their three kids. Her family is now nearby to help when her husband is on tour, and when he's home—often for extended periods of time—he's Mr. Mom. It may look like Amy is taking one for the team while her husband is off doo-wopping his wild oats, but if you ask her, she's the lucky one. "He's much happier, but staying home with my boys is also what I always wanted," she says. The sign of a successful contract? When each party thinks they're getting the better end of the deal. My friend Marie used to have a tough time on girls' night out. Her husband would text and call with a zillion nonurgent alerts ("Brady has a test Thursday—has he studied?!"), and she would come home irritated at her husband and her life. Finally, they compromised: "We have sex before I go out, and he can't contact me unless the house is burning down," she says. "It works!"

STEPHANIE RAUSSER/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM

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### 3. If the old terms are outdated, make new ones.

To keep a relationship contract copacetic, you may need to renegotiate every so often. At the very least, reality-check your initial expectations on a regular basis. When Annette, 34, and her husband got married, they wanted at least three kids. Then, when number two was on the way, Annette changed her mind. "Being pregnant and having a rambunctious 3-year-old was awful," says Annette. "I was miserable—and I knew I didn't want to do it again." She brought it up to her husband, and he agreed to new terms: "To him, having a happy marriage is more important than an arbitrary number of kids... as long as we also got a dog." Says Annette, "I bring it up with him periodically to make sure he's still okay with it, but we're both completely happy."

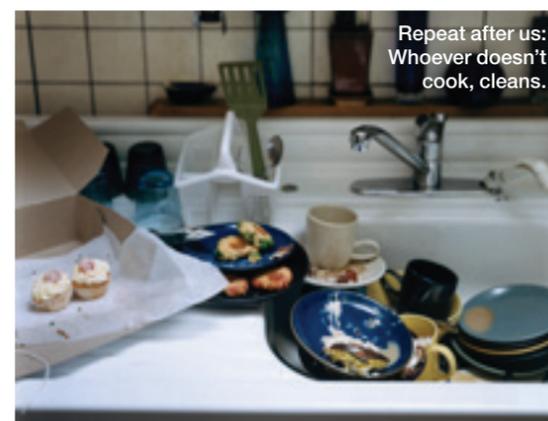
Like the kid thing, a lot of arrangements take shape as the years tick by, and tweaking your old ways can solve festering problems. Melissa, 36, makes more money than her husband, and also handles their finances. Because she has access to all of the statements, she started micromanaging every dime he spent—a habit that didn't work for either of them. "I'd tally up how often he went to Subway in a given week and send him an exclamation-point-filled text," she admits. "I hated that he spent our food budget on sandwiches when we had cold cuts at home!" Ultimately she had to choose between endless fights and just

letting go. They agreed that although she may bring home the larger paycheck, it's still his to spend without rebuke. Together they worked up some guidelines to ease the hostility: She can't comment on any purchase he makes under

\$150, and they *both* discuss money spent above that amount. Also, if Melissa wants her hubby to take a sandwich to work, she has to make it for him.

Taylor, 27, originally made a deal with her husband that they would take turns at night dealing with their 2-year-old son, who doesn't sleep well. "But 90 percent of the time, I go get him—and that's honestly okay with me," she says. Nevertheless, the broken agreement could grate, especially the next morning. "After I'd been up half the night, my husband would moan, 'Ugh, I didn't sleep well *at all*' and I wanted to kill him." Their solution? Taylor's husband now does bedtime every night and gets their son up in the morning, allowing her an extra half hour of sleep and some evening alone time. "When splitting the duties evenly down the middle failed, we figured out comparable trades to make things more fair," she says.

Just make sure your contract is truly broken before you try to fix it. I learned that the hard way back in May, when I told Nick that after an intense spring workload of raising nearly \$200,000 for a cancer charity, I was going to take the summer off. I thought I'd successfully planted the seed—casually mentioning the projects I could do with our kids, plus the *Top Chef*-worthy meals I'd whip up—and I gauged the look on his face to be amenable. But when the time came to discuss the logistics, he said this: "Whoa, Erin, I thought you were joking!" The fact is, in our two-freelancer household, my vacation would mean he would have to work more—and that wasn't our deal. We are 50/50 partners on everything from making money to cleaning toilets. I have to remind Nick of this when he notes how much more butt-wiping he does than any of his guy friends, and clearly I needed a refresher too. Could we renegotiate this arrangement? Sure, but I want to honor the bargain we made. Our goal was that neither of us would ever feel swallowed up by work or parenting, and it's worked thus far. Nick is the type of dad who's home enough to know where the missing pink Croc may be; I love that about him. Messing with our balance wasn't worth a summer break. So, work it is. Hence my byline on this story, which I plan to reread as often as necessary. **R**



Repeat after us: Whoever doesn't cook, cleans.

LISA KERESZI/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM

## Want to make your marriage contract legit?

Mira Kirshenbaum helps clients draw up actual marriage contracts on everything from the amount of time they can spend golfing to learning to love each other's pets, and she says they can save a relationship. Here's how to D.I.Y. **First, agree on the areas you'll include**—chores, paying bills, sex, in-laws, use of free time, children and child care,

whatever. "Get as specific as you can about your hopes and expectations in these areas," says Kirshenbaum. Then **initial those items you agree on** without receiving anything in return. For things you aren't quite willing to sign on the dotted line about, list what you'd need in order to make it happen, and negotiate until you come to a wholehearted

contract. "**Don't say yes to anything you're not prepared to fully carry out**," warns Kirshenbaum. Once you've settled your terms, write them down, and when you're fully committed to the list, **have a ceremony** (some dirty martinis after the kids go to bed will do) and sign the agreement. And don't forget to revisit and amend when needed.