



**Kira Vermond**  
demystifies money

# The green monster

In our consumer culture, it's easy to get caught up in keeping up with the Joneses. But money envy is too often misspent.

I don't know exactly when I decided we needed a new sofa. It could have been after I finally looked up from my squirming kids long enough to notice the old one covered in stains I'd need a forensic kit to identify. But I more likely turned weak in the wallet after spending an evening at my old university friend Lisa's palatial new house with her mark-free furnishings.

Lisa is a doctor who works harder than anyone I know and deserves all the tchotchkes she cares to buy. Even so, as I stood in her doorway taking in the gleaming hardwood floors, a horrible, slithering sensation came over me. "What a beautiful home!" I croaked.

It sure was – and I wanted it for myself. Without warning, I had my first experience with money envy.

I knew the day would come when our parallel pecuniary paths would split. Let's face it: No one will ever approach me at a party and say, "Wow. You're a writer? You must be raking it in!" I'm okay with that. But I didn't know how it would feel. Her gorgeous house and the fact that Lisa has in the past graciously offered to loan us cash so our families could vacation together had tapped straight into my insecurities.

"Some of our most precious friendships are formed when money or careers are non-existent. Unfortunately many of these relationships are challenged as we enter into adulthood, especially when one's financial successes are leaps and bounds above the other," says Rhonda Sherwood, a certified financial planner in Vancouver. "Envy and resentment have ruined many friendships."

Money envy hits everybody at some point. Your friends just bought a cottage on the lake. Your neighbour just pulled up in a luxury car. Your sister is jetting off to Club Med in Ixtapa – again. If they're doing it, why can't you?

The problem is, most of them can't afford it either, says

Margaret Johnson, president of Solutions Credit Counseling Service, in Surrey, B.C.

"A lot of these people are living 30 days away from the edge of bankruptcy because they're trying to portray an image, and that image is expensive," she says.

Kristin Doucet of Toronto tries to keep perspective as her friends travel the world, upgrade vehicles and buy expensive houses. She's assuming this group can afford the luxuries – they're making in the high six figures and don't have kids – but Doucet, a magazine editor who has an 18-month-old toddler, tries not to compare lifestyles.

"Two years ago I was more into keeping up with the Joneses. Now I'm more into keeping up with the housework," she jokes.

Whenever her friends tell her about their vacation plans, Doucet, instead of lamenting the fact that she can't fly off to Fiji at the drop of a hat, focuses on what she really cares about: her daughter, Sarah, husband, David, and renovating a comfortable older home they plan to live in for years.

Doucet has the right idea, says Sherwood. Work toward financial goals that mean something to you, and you're less likely to care what everybody else is spending.

"Ask yourself, 'If I had six months to live, what would I really value?' That's where you want to spend your energy," Sherwood says.

Often, you'll realize that money envy is a misspent emotion. A couple of weeks after my new, red Ikea sofa arrived (which matches nothing, might I add), I admitted to Lisa my couch covetousness.

"Oh, ours looks like that because it's usually got a blanket to keep the dog hair off," she admitted. "We remove it for company."

Don't say it. I know. ■

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