

MONEY: A ROYAL ROAD TO DIVORCE

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

More and more couples are breaking up over “secrets.” But, contrary to popular belief, these secrets aren’t just about an illicit sexual affair. In a culture that prizes consumption, money secrets are becoming a new type of deception for many couples.

Everyone brings a monetary history with him or her when they enter into marriage. Oftentimes, the level of financial debt that exists for either partner is rarely explored or discussed prior to marriage. This occurs in part, due to most couple’s desire to assume the best about each other. Many couples proceed blindly into the marriage, figuring their love will help them handle whatever unexpected problems arise in their joint future. Money is most frequently ignored as an important pre-marital topic in first time marriages.

Once the knot is tied, why are so many current couples struggling with financial deception? As spending and borrowing money becomes easier via ATMs, online shopping, refinancing opportunities, and Internet banking or gambling, etc. people are able to behave more impulsively with their money. They’re also able to hide their financial mistakes for a significant period of time before they are discovered. Unfortunately, money deceptions create an enormous sense of betrayal, and oftentimes, affect one’s marriage as negatively as a sexual affair. Clearly, both forms of lying involve a dual betrayal of trust and sense of overall security originally assumed at the onset of the relationship.

Why are money problems so de-stabilizing for a marriage? Sometimes, a rose is a rose. But, when it comes to money, money is usually more than a financial asset. Money is a highly charged topic. Consider the fact that money symbolizes many of our strongest emotional needs. For many people, money provides a sense of personal security and positive self-worth. Money is often seen as the road to fulfilling our hopes and dreams. We also know that the person who controls the couple’s money usually wields power and control in the relationship. In short, money is a common battlefield for sensitive emotional topics. For instance, an angry partner may over spend as a passive-aggressive approach to nonverbally express their dissatisfaction with the marriage. It is not uncommon to hear of a disgruntled spouse who secretly accumulates debt that eventually can affect their partner’s credit rating, sometimes for the rest of their life.

Unfortunately, money problems are rarely resolved in a short amount of time. Financial fallout may linger and drain the emotional goodwill in a couple’s on-going relationship. Without patience and a commitment to resolve marital problems, few couples successfully survive financial betrayal. Without emotional goodwill, the couple’s relationship doesn’t have the stamina to weather the accumulation of problems they must face over a lifetime together.

In our culture, money has always been one of several social taboos. Many of us can recall our parents telling us while growing up, “Don’t ask how much they paid for that! That’s not nice.” As a result, we internalized the rule that said we shouldn’t discuss money with other people. Hence, with engaged couples, each individual’s financial status is rarely inquired about or discussed. Even within the context of marriage counseling, many couple’s would rather talk about their sex life than their financial woes.

In a survey conducted with couple’s in marriage counseling, couple’s indicated that stressors associated with money fights resulted in less time spent together, increased fatigue and anxiety, bickering and fighting over money spent, discussions of divorce and an expressed desire for less debt. Of those couples who ended in divorce, 60% said that finances was a major factor. While financial difficulties are a common contributing factor in today’s marriages, very few therapists admit to spending much time discussing the couple’s problems handling their finances.

While couples in therapy work on identifying their unspoken conflicts and healing the emotional mistrust that has been created by financial betrayal, I also enlist their involvement in actively resolving their financial mismanagement. Given the long-term repercussions from financial debt, I usually encourage couples to work with professional debt managers, to attend relevant 12 Step Programs such as Gambler’s Anonymous, read books on getting out of debt (i.e. Your Money Or Your Life, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin or How to Get out of Debt, Stay out of Debt, and Live Prosperously by Jerrold Mundis). If trust is to be re-established, couples must also demonstrate a commitment to change how they manage money. And finally, money problems belong to individuals and as such, each individual must explore their emotional relationship to money.

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