

West Side Spirit
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Depositing Emotional Currency in the Marriage Bank

Far too many couples fall in love, having met, spent a good deal of time together, forming an emotional bond full of “emotional currency,” only to find themselves with a whole new set of unrealistic expectations and beliefs about what marriage should be. Those misconceptions can slowly erode the love they had found to the point where there is a “negative balance in their marriage bank account.” Emotional bankruptcy can result in psychological or actual divorce.

Emotional bankruptcy is a simple concept: yet it is also one that most new couples do not realize can happen to them. They fail to recognize the difficult, challenging nature of marriage and unconsciously believe they should not have to work at it. Many people would never dream of putting less energy into their careers; not would they think it possible to raise intelligent and successful children without hard work.

But when it comes to marriage, many couples feel it should be easy and come to resent the fact that love is not unconditional, nor to be taken for granted. This misconception goes back to the desire for unconditional love that we hopefully received as children. This wish is especially strong in those of us who did not receive that early, necessary nurturing and have overwhelming expectations that we should receive it from our mates.

When we first fall in love, everything seems perfect. We are in the clouds, and all we see are the similarities, real or imagined, between ourselves and our partners. Marriage becomes a rude awakening to the reality of many differences in personality and past histories, some of which may be dysfunctional, that give rise to differing expectations and patterns of behavior and goals. There also gender differences to deal with. Marriage is an intricate coming-together of two people who have differing interests, needs and wishes at different times, including varying needs for closeness and distance. Those differences are often personalized by each partner and taken as purposely hurtful.

As result, communication – and plenty of it – as well as honest and fair negotiation are vital to developing idiosyncratic “rules” that work for both partners. As mates, we must be willing to please each other, to push ourselves to understand what the other needs – which may often not be what we might wish to give or might not want for ourselves. This “stretch” to put ourselves in our spouses’ places is one of the most difficult, challenging tasks of marriage!

Such positive, loving actions of good will keep depositing emotional currency into our marriage banks to offset the “withdrawals” of life’s complications, such as child and career demands, sickness or the death of loved ones. There are inevitable fights and squabbles that accompany the continual adjustment process in the “high-wire” balancing act that marriage is, and if we are not continually working at our relationships, sadly, the marriage bank becomes empty.

Many couples go to marital therapists at the point when the marriage “in the red,” having no idea of how or why they have developed so much resentment, anger and emotional isolation. Therapists find such couples have taken few actions to make time for each other, to bond with each other, actions as simple as having dates or spending time alone, away from the rest of the world. They are usually stuck in patterns of mutual recrimination and disappointment with little ability to listen to or empathize with their partner’s needs and vulnerabilities. Fun, too often, is a distant memory.

Such couples have no concept of the tools necessary for a successful relationship or think it should have just magically happened. They do not comprehend how their pains and disappointments of the past recreate patterns that severely interfere with creating a satisfying, idiosyncratic relationship in the present. These couples need to learn to know themselves and their partners much better, possibly in couple’s treatment. They need to learn to let go of entrenched resentments and anger and need to take time to please each other, in ways small and large, finding better patterns of interaction. They need to communicate their needs and desires and negotiate them in a balanced way that feels fair to each partner. They also need to learn to forgive their partners for disappointments and hurts.

Only through hard work can couples build up their marital accounts with sufficient emotional currency to withstand the hardships of life and to draw upon to maintain the healthy, joyous marriages they envisioned when they decided to marry and live “happily ever after.”