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WHEN DO FINANCIAL ISSUES BECOME FERTILE GROUND FOR DIVORCE? Six indicators that will tip you off

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When asked about the number one cause for divorce, most people will cite infidelity—that is, one partner cheating on another. They are right about cheating, but not in terms of having a love affair outside the marriage. Much of the cheating to which I am referring has to do with "financial infidelity," and major disagreements on how to spend money.

Sure, there are plenty of disputes over how to raise the children, where to vacation and where to live, but money disputes—that is the primary reason couples split up.

Naturally, it would be wise to learn about a potential partner's spending habits during the dating stage to spare some inevitable angst, but few pay much attention to money issues until they are in the marriage, that is, once the money becomes "communal."

Oddly enough, during my practice over the past 25 years, my clients have consistently stated that the major cause of his/her divorce had to do with one party hiding money from another; spending it foolishly; holding it back selfishly; or not agreeing on how it should be spent and on what.

No person in a committed relationship has to be caught off guard if he/she is awake and constantly aware of the six indicators below:

1. Your significant other is *hiding* money from you: This might include something as petty as not giving you back the change from that hundred dollar bill you handed over when he/she went to the convenience store for milk, to finding out years into the marriage that you partner has been stuffing away hundreds or thousands in a hidden bank account in the Cayman Islands. It's not a marital sin to have separate accounts, whether they are checking or savings (or stocks and bonds), so long as you are transparent about them and agree that what is yours is yours, and what is his or hers is theirs. The difficulty arises when one person stumbles upon a bank or financial statement about an account they had no idea about. Openly sharing such an account would have been the prudent thing to do before entering the marriage or when he/she sets up the account after tying the knot. Yes, most decisions and disclosures about money should take place before people partner up—couples should set some ground rules that detail what is fair and right and what is not—but often those rules are made up as they go along.

2. Your significant other is *reckles*s with money: If your mate wants to spend time at a casino; bets routinely on the ponies or sports events, you may be headed for disaster. Obsessive gambling is an addiction, just like substance abuse. Gambling is not the only reckless money habit; spending money lavishly on things you really can't afford is another issue that will eventually cause the demise of the marriage or relationship.

3. Your mate is *selfish* and/or *cheap*: If your partner spends a good deal of money on him or herself (e.g. buys a new Mercedes Benz and insists you drive a Kia) resentment will surely build over time. Also, if on special occasions, he/she buys you the same 'ole candy or golf balls and you go out of your way to save up to buy that expensive wristwatch or exotic vacation he or she wanted, that, too, will cause tension, disappointment and resentment over time. What works is if you both agree on gift-giving. Perhaps you decide to forego gifting on a special holiday and agree that the "gift money" will be better spent on that high-tech outdoor built-in barbecue you *both* want. What is important is that the gifts you exchange are somewhat comparable in monetary (and sentimental) value. At the end of the day, it is not the price of the gifts, it is the demonstrable value of what the worth of that gift connotes. For instance, on your wedding anniversary, it would be hurtful to buy him a Lamborghini when all he gives you is a t-shirt!

4. He or she *runs up* the credit card debt: If one party is relatively frugal with credit card spending or recurring debt, and the other careless, this could become the one single factor that takes down the marriage/partnership. Overspending translates to incompatible "money values." When any two people have disparate value systems in any one area, especially money, that is always cause for alarm. If there are two vastly different points of view on how credit cards are to be used, that creates a situation of constant conflict.

5. Who *controls* the money: When a couple decide and agree upon who will handle the monthly bill-paying and/or who will call the shots on many major money matters, the marriage seems to go smoothly. If both are tussling over who the checkbook captain is and who gets to call the final shot on other money matters, such as the amount to pay for a new home; what and how many financial investments should be chosen and when to divest of them there will be power struggles. Issues over control are always at the center of any divorce; most of them dealing with money.

6. He/she is *dishonest* with money: If your mate suggests you cheat anyone, from the IRS, to short changing the handyman, that may be a pre-cursor that he or she will cheat you, too. Let's say he/she deposits the yearly bonus or dividend payout from your stock broker into your joint bank account. If you find yourself conducting your own private investigation and learn that the amount of the funds deposited don't match the amounts of the checks he/she received, you can be sure your spouse will be dishonest with you in other "money" ways. If you can see that you are heading for divorce your first order of business (after retaining a good family law attorney) is to hire a forensic accountant. In most cases, once the divorce is underway, they can dig up the assets you may never have known to which you were entitled.