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Pay Dirt: Marriage, money: Till debt do us part?

If you're saying "I do," you also need to say "I will" when it comes to talking about finances with your future spouse.

By **KARA MCGUIRE**, Star Tribune

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But the focus tends to be on big-day money matters (Who's paying for the wedding? The dress is *how much?*), not money matters that can affect a couple's happiness throughout life. Questions about debt, financial goals and money values may not be addressed until a conflict arises after the ceremony. And by then, it can be too late.

Amy Jensen Wolff, an Edina-based certified financial planner specializing in divorce, said it's sad when couples only begin to understand each other's financial behavior during divorce proceedings.

"Openness and honesty is so important to a marriage," said Wolff. "If they don't have it in their financial lives, it just leads to mistrust in so many areas."

St. Paul financial educator Ruth Hayden tells couples in her classes to have a money meeting in a neutral, public place like a coffee shop. Couples should come clean about credit scores and debt and disclose their savings and incomes. No blame or judgment permitted.

In these meetings, couples may find that when it comes to money, opposites attract. A study conducted earlier this year by University of Pennsylvania Wharton School lecturer Scott Rick and two other researchers found tightwads and spendthrifts tend to marry, perhaps because they subconsciously hope their partner will help them to act less stingy or less spendy.

But for these pairings -- or any relationship, really -- to work, communication is key. Some couples prefer having these conversations in front of a neutral party -- a financial planner or coach.

These aren't "light topics that you sit down and start chatting about," said Bjorn Nesvold, a financial associate with Thrivent Financial for Lutherans in Lake Elmo. He meets with couples about to tie the knot and uses a Thrivent-developed program called "From Me to We" to address commingling finances, saving for retirement as a couple and buying

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It doesn't have to be all seriousness, though. Couples can learn a lot about each other by asking "fun, walk-around-the-lake" questions such as "How would you spend the money if you won the lottery?" and "If I handed you a \$100 bill, what would you do with it?" Hayden suggested.

Long-married couples should talk as well, especially given the current financial climate. About three in 10 Americans said the recession has "added stress to," "strained" or even "ruined" their relationship, according to a recent online survey for ING Direct.

Janelle Torvik and David Billigmeier, both 27, are marrying this weekend. The couple didn't talk much about money before their engagement. In subsequent conversations in Nesvold's office, the pair has learned that he's "Microsoft Money and I'm totally like, 'Oh, I think I have about that much in my account,'" Torvik said. The couple, who will live in Hugo after the wedding, differ over how much to save. Billigmeier would like to save more for the future, but is more likely to go out and buy a top-of-the-line Blu-ray player. Torvik is more frugal. The two are on the same page regarding debt ("good debt" such as housing, is OK, but they like to avoid

the other kinds).

Nesvold is helping them find -- and keep -- common ground.

Mr. Microsoft Money will obviously manage the day-to-day tracking of their finances, and he encourages his wife-to-be to open up the program at any time. The duo will combine their earnings in a household account. And both will have a separate monthly allowance each can spend as they please.

Many advisers, including Hayden and Wolff, recommend this approach. "You have to have a place to practice in money where you make decisions together," Hayden explained. "Keeping it separate gives the illusion that you don't have any differences," which leads to conflict. Hayden does recommend each person have a credit card in his or her name, but its use must follow a household credit card policy.

"I think it is very important for both spouses to take responsibility for financial status," Wolff said. "So often, I hear one spouse blaming the other."

Aside from openness and communication, couples will have a better chance staying

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happily hitched by following what Wolff calls "Financial Planning 101: Avoid having credit card debt, have an emergency savings account, don't live beyond your means," she said.

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