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Couples need to have compatible financial goals

So, you're getting married.

You've probably had many discussions about money with your significant other.

Trouble is, they've probably centered on big-day money matters (Who's paying for the wedding? The dress is how much?) -- and not money matters that can affect a your long-term happiness.

Questions about debt, financial goals and money values.

Often, these aren't addressed until a conflict arises after the ceremony. And by then, it can be too late.

Amy Jensen Wolff, a 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."

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 might find that when it comes to money, opposites attract. But for any relationship 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, Minn. 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 insurance.

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.

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

-- Minneapolis Star Tribune