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Our Emotional Affair with Money

Have you ever argued with your spouse or partner about money? Perhaps it was over some small expenditure like a new golf bag or maybe it was about a much larger purchase like a car or house. So why do emotions run high at times when we think or talk about money?

It's not surprising that money and emotions are intrinsically linked. We are human beings after all, fully wired for emotional response. Our relationship with money often defies logic and evokes various types of emotional reactions—fear, joy, sadness, hope, love, or sometimes even shock.

From early childhood, we begin to experience the world, including interactions involving money. Looking back, we tend to remember pieces of the experience and apply our own story or meaning to these events. We carry these stories and their meanings around with us to make sense of the world, and these “lessons learned” frame our attitudes and actions towards money.

Early experiences influence our attitudes and actions

In working with a very successful client, she told me that when she was young, her parents filed for bankruptcy. The family had to move from their home and live with relatives for many years, eventually resulting in her parents' divorce. The fear, shame, and loss shaped her life so much so that she worked throughout high school and saved enough money to purchase her own home while she was still in college. She told me that she had vowed that would never be homeless again.

While her past experiences with money motivated her to create a secure environment for herself and her family, it also affected her ability to enjoy her money and success. She admitted that, for her, no amount of money would make her feel entirely secure.

In our too busy lives, emotions tend to override intellect as we make thousands of decisions, both important and insignificant, in any given day. The more aware we are of our stories running in the background and our emotional response to them, the better we become at choosing to make different decisions that lead to more thoughtful and healthier outcomes.

Good behavior, bad behaviors, and money

How we label our own actions and those of others as “good” or “bad” can influence our decisions about money as well. If we had a personal experience with someone who did something we thought was bad to achieve personal gain, or if we associate money and wealth with greed, we may be so adverse to any gain for our own benefit that we actually make decisions that hurt our well-being.

If we subconsciously assigned a “bad label” to money, we can hurt our ability to act in our own best interest, including saving for retirement or managing our investments. When we are aware of our attitudes towards money and the stories that shaped them, we can begin to separate the two and take control of our financial responsibilities.

Achieving balance between money and emotions

At its core, money is a conduit, a medium used to exchange for value in our society. In its best use, it serves us, our intentions, what we want for ourselves, our loved ones, and in turn supports what we care about most. As we become aware of the many stories we have about money and what they mean to us, we are able to discern whether they still hold true or are holding us back. Our decisions become more intentional and in actively making choices, we continue to strengthen our ability to make money work for us, rather than stopping or entangling us.

Perhaps you are able to cultivate a mentality of newfound abundance to provide a sense of “all will be well” while also to tuning into those opportunities that will further enhance your life and wellbeing. Furthermore, you may find that there could be a need within your community that is speaking to you, or it may be that you would find that there is work to do in the world at-large that you would like to drive or play a part in.

The next time you feel a sense of compulsion around money try to stop and ask yourself, “Where and when have I felt this way before?” Be curious about remembering some of the stories that have shaped you. Then ask yourself—is this experience useful to me right now? It may or may not be. Only the conscious version of you can best decide.

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Shellie is a Senior Wealth Advisor and Principal at The Colony Group and has over 25 years of experience advising individuals, families and business owners. Her wealth management and financial planning expertise provides valued insights and solutions in all aspects of financial planning including estate and trust planning, investment management, charitable planning, retirement planning, cash flow analysis and risk management. She serves a core group of the firm’s clients, overseeing all aspects of the relationship and enjoys working with multiple generations of families to secure their values and legacies for generations to come. Shellie is on our Her Wealth® Executive Committee and co-chairs our Her Wealth® Scholarship committee.

