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Discuss Finances Before Saying 'I Do'

By PAUL KATZEFF

June is the heart of the wedding season. If you or someone you care for is about to walk down that aisle, let wisdom speak now: Don't say "I do" before you and your betrothed have an intimate talk about those unmentionables — your finances.

Discussing money beforehand may be your best chance of the marriage forever holding its peace.

"You do this to make sure both of you are on the same page and to make sure no one has any ugly surprises," said Bill Hardekopf, chief executive of LowCards.com, a credit card selection site.

Once married, your debts as well as assets become shared. Each spouse needs to know about the other's financial strengths and weaknesses. "Otherwise, there's less time for figuring out how to deal with potential problems," Hardekopf said.

To be open and candid, couples should disclose their financials to each other — income, assets and liabilities. Put it in writing. And go the extra step. "Get each other's credit report," Hardekopf said. "They're free. See if there are any mistakes. And, yes, this lets you see what you're inheriting financially in your future spouse."

A spouse-to-be can take offense when his or her betrothed suggests this disclosure. It smacks of a lack of trust.

"But there are neutral reasons for taking these steps," Hardekopf said. "First, it is in your mutual interests to verify that information in your reports belongs to each of you and not someone else by mistake. Second, if either has a weak score, it can identify things you need to discuss."

It can help you decide ways to improve a score. And that will affect both of you in marriage. It will impact how much you will pay for credit for a house or car, for example.

Be Constructive

There are concrete steps you can take to improve a score. For one, you can limit your debt to no more than 33% of your available credit, Hardekopf suggests. For another, you can avoid exceeding the credit limit on credit cards.

Before marriage, couples should address three questions, says Seymour Reisman, a matrimonial attorney for Reisman Peirez & Reisman, in Garden City, N.Y.:

- **Do we pool our money and how do we pay bills?**

- **What if either of us dies?**

- **What happens if we ever get divorced?**

To answer the first question, a couple must decide who will be responsible for which expenses. Some couples pool all of their income and assets, then share obligations evenly. Others allocate responsibilities in some way.