

Emotional Bank Accounts

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Just as making deposits to your savings account can build up cash reserves, give you a feeling of security, and help protect you from a financial crisis if you fall on hard times, building up your relationship's "emotional bank account" can help you enjoy peace and security in your relationship, and protect you and your partner from a relationship crisis when things aren't going well.

There are many ways to build up your emotional bank account. One important way is through "bids for connection," identified in research by John Gottman, Ph.D., of the University of Washington in Seattle, as major building blocks for stable and happy relationships. Dr. Gottman has observed hundreds of couples making and responding to bids in his "Love Lab," and has been able to predict with more than 90% accuracy whether a given couple will still be together in 10 years just by watching them interact for 15 minutes.

Bids for connection include anything and everything designed to promote or restore a feeling of connection and solidarity between two people. There are two critical aspects of bids for connection: (1) how frequently each partner makes a bid, and (2) how each partner responds when the other makes a bid.

Types of Bids

Bids can be trivial or profound, calm or agitated, cheerful or blue. Here are some examples of verbal bids for connection:

- "Can you believe it's going to rain again today?"
- "Wow. Did you see that double play?"
- "I heard from the contractor today. He says we're looking at another \$5,000 for the roof."
- "We really need to talk about the music for the wedding. We're starting to run out of time."

Bids also can be nonverbal:

- Affectionate touching, such as a pat on the behind, a squeeze of the hand, a hug, a peck on the cheek, a light neck rub;
- Facial expressions, such as smiling, blowing a kiss, winking, sticking out your tongue in a playful way;
- Playful touching, such as tickling, bopping, wrestling, teasing;
- Considerate gestures, such as opening a door, offering a place to sit, handing over something before the person asks, offering to carry something for the other person;
- Vocalizing, such as laughing, grunting, sighing, or groaning in a way that invites interaction or interest.

When couples are first together, partners are highly motivated to make frequent bids for connection. Think back to the beginning of your relationship: chances are you called the other person a lot, asked about his/her day, started conversations, gave nonverbal signs of affection and sexual interest, and generally tried to do things to let the other person know you care.

As a couple's relationship matures, it is common for some people to start making bids for connection less frequently. Perhaps other areas of life take so much time and energy there isn't much left for the relationship. Or perhaps complacency sets in, as the partners think "We're together now, so I don't have to keep doing all that stuff I used to do." It's important to fight these trends in a relationship when they start to take hold, because Dr. Gottman's research has demonstrated in a scientifically valid way that when it comes to bids, more is better.

Responses to Bids

Dr. Gottman's research also supports that the way the partner on the receiving end responds to a bid has a huge impact on the health and future of the relationship. When people in happy couples make a bid for connection, they are rewarded by their partner with a response that affirms the relationship and creates a sense of "we-ness". Not so in unhappy couples. In these couples, the response people get from their partner after making a bid is unsatisfying or painful. There are three main types of responses to bids for connection: "turning away," "turning against" & "turning toward".

Turning away

In a "turning away" response, the receiver conveys that the bid is not important or not worth much attention. It could be that the receiver is busy with something, such as watching TV or using the computer, and says nothing, or waives the partner away. For example:

Bid: "What should we make for dinner?"

Response: [without looking up from TV, computer, or book] "Whatever."

In another type of "turning away" response, the receiver counters with something only mildly related, or starts a completely different train of thought. For example:

Bid: "Honey, look at this ad. That's the lowest price I've seen for the car you want."

Response: "I'm worried about Janey. Do you think we should talk to her teacher?"

Most "turning away" responses are not made on purpose. Usually, they are a result of being preoccupied or in a hurry – **the receiver doesn't fully realize a bid was made** and doesn't refocus concentration enough to respond constructively. Sometimes, one partner tunes out what the other partner says because of anger or feeling overwhelmed, or because the partner made the bid in a harsh or uninviting way. Couples can usually get past these if they are occasional.

If "turning away" responses occur frequently, however, the partner making them conveys that he or she doesn't care about the bid, wants to avoid talking to the partner, or worse — doesn't take the partner seriously. When things get to this point, the relationship is suffering and is likely to end prematurely.

Turning against

In a “turning against” response, the receiver responds to the bid in a way that is disrespectful, provocative, critical, defensive, or domineering. For example:

Bid: “It’s so nice out today. Let’s go for lunch at that place with tables outside.”

Response: “No way – just look at this place! If you’d start pitching in around here, maybe I’d have time to go out for lunch!”

Bid: “What a day I’ve had! I’m exhausted!”

Response: “I told you not to accept that job, but you just had to take it! I knew it would be too much for you!”

“Turning against” responses sting, even if the person making them isn’t aware that he or she is being hurtful. These responses convey that the partner is unwelcome, a nuisance, or just plain wrong for making the bid in the first place. If you’ve ever received a “turning against” response, you know that it leads to feeling hurt or angry, can be the start of a big fight, and if it seems to happen often, makes you less inclined to try connecting with your partner at all.

Usually, “turning against” responses are made because the receiver feels frustrated, angry, powerless, exhausted, or fearful, and believes there is no choice but to make the “turning against” response. **People who make these responses can learn how to handle their feelings differently**, and it’s a good thing – in Dr. Gottman’s research, “turning against” responses were found to end relationships more quickly than “turning away” responses.

Turning toward

In a “turning-toward” response, the way the receiver responds shows attentiveness, concern, interest, curiosity, and that the person making the bid is important enough to deserve a few minutes of undivided attention. For example:

Bid: “Look what I found for the living room. I got it at a great price.”

Response: “That’s a nice color. I think it will go well with the drapes.”

Bid: “What an awful day I had. It was a zoo at the office.”

Response: “You look exhausted. Come sit down and tell me about it.”

We all like to receive “turning-toward” responses when we make a bid for connection. These responses affirm us, calm us when we’re upset, make us feel liked or loved, and fill up the “emotional bank account” in our relationship. They not only make us feel good, but they lead to our liking, loving, and respecting our partner, and are associated with long-term stability and satisfaction in marriages.

Take-home message

The take-home message about bids for connection is that both partners have tremendous power to create happiness and satisfaction in their relationship. Making bids for connection doesn’t have to be laborious, time-consuming, or expensive- it can be as simple as giving a hug or asking a question. “Turning toward” responses, likewise, can be as simple as hugging back, or looking up from the TV for a minute to focus on what your partner is trying to say. The cost-benefit ratio is staggering. For what amounts to just a few minutes per day, you can build your emotional bank account so that you have a surplus of goodwill, trust, and affection to enjoy, and to buffer the stresses when, for whatever reason, times get rough.