

2)Instincts and Habits

Most people think they have control over their behavior. They think they choose to do whatever it is they do. But many of us who have studied human behavior scientifically, and have tried to help people change their behavior, know differently. We know that the vast majority of what a person does is driven by instincts and habits -- ways of behaving that are automatic and almost effortless. So if you want to make Love Bank deposits and avoid withdrawals, pay close attention to the subject of instincts and habits. That's because if you don't try to control them, they can control you and destroy the love you have for each other.

You were born with instincts that are there to help you survive. Instincts are behavioral patterns that do not seem to be learned -- they occur in almost finished form the first time they are triggered. It's obvious that babies have a variety of instincts because they do many of the same things, such as sucking their thumbs, that weren't taught to them. But even as adults, we have more instinctive behavior than we realize, and much of this behavior will make or break a marriage.

Habits are different than instincts because they are learned. Habits are formed by practice, and without practice, for example, you could never have walked up to a computer for the first time and type 90 words a minute. A habit is any behavior that is repeated often enough to become automatic and almost effortless. And if certain conditions are present when you are learning the behavior (a particular room, for example), eventually those conditions will tend to trigger the habit or make it easier to perform.

Even complex social skills are habits learned through repetition. Conversation, for example is perfected through considerable practice, as is affection, admiration, and even honesty.

If you had to think creatively about each of your actions throughout the day, your brain would have to be the size of a barn. So to save on brain space, some of your behavior is stored as instincts while other behavior is stored as habits. Whenever a particular behavior is summoned, you can automatically repeat what's stored rather than carefully create the behavior from scratch. That way you don't have to think about every response you make throughout the day. You simply trigger an instinct or habit that is stored away in your brain. By the time you get to be my age, so much of your behavior is in the form of habits that you can get through most of the day on autopilot. That's why older people like me are so predictable.

Instincts often help habits develop. An angry outburst is a good example of this. I've seen an angry outburst at the moment of a child's birth, and we can be assured that there wasn't much learning that caused that behavior. And as a child grows, the way anger is expressed becomes increasingly sophisticated. But it isn't the instinct that becoming sophisticated -- it's the developing habit of an angry outburst, supported by the instinct, that makes it sophisticated. In marriage, one of our most destructive behaviors is an angry outbursts, where we intentionally try to hurt our spouse, causing massive Love Bank withdrawals. But it's something we do naturally - it's instinctive.

Instincts and habits, such as angry outbursts, are often inappropriate. They may have been created as valid solutions to certain problems, but many are unsuitable for other problems that trigger them anyway. This is where our intelligence comes in handy. We can actually eliminate certain habits when we discover that they are ineffective in solving certain problems, and we can substitute effective habits.

We can't change our instincts, but we can short-circuit their approach to a problem. If I have an instinct to have angry outbursts, it doesn't mean that I must actually have one. I can create new habits that prevent me from losing my temper. Bad habits are hard to replace with good habits, especially when they are driven by instinct, but it can be done. And, in marriage, it must be done if it is to be successful.

In my study of what it takes to build Love Bank accounts, I learned that habits were much more important to consider than isolated instances of behavior. Habits that deposit love units build very large Love Bank balances because they are repeated over and over almost effortlessly. Isolated behavior, on the other hand, usually doesn't effect the Love Bank that much. In the same way, habits that withdraw love units tend to destroy Love Bank balances because they are also repeated almost effortlessly.

So I encourage spouses to get into the habit of doing whatever it takes to make each other happy (deposit love units), and avoid habits that made each other unhappy (withdraw love units). A simple commitment to do just that is a good place to start. But Love Bank balances change for the better only when that commitment directs couples to create new habits.

All of my remaining basic concepts will help me show you how to form habits that will create and sustain your love for each other. My next basic concept will help you form habits that build Love Bank balances.