

In difficult times the resilience of your relationship really depends on how well it has been nurtured on a day-to-day basis. Building a positive “relationship bank balance” lowers the risk of conflict flare-ups.

Scientists conduct strange experiments - spare change was left in a phone booth along with a stamped letter that hadn't been sent. Sometimes the spare change was removed. People were studied using the phone booth - those who found the money were more likely drop the letter into a nearby post box. Finding the money perked up their spirits, they felt so much happier that they would do a good deed for a stranger.

What does this experiment have to do with relationships? Simply that being loving towards your partner is more likely when you are happy.

A ‘Positive’ Investment Strategy

Another strange experiment is the “Love Lab”, a long term research project on couple relationships by Dr John Gottman. In the days before Big Brother he customised an apartment where a couple lived for a whole day watched by cameras. Hundreds of couples who have participated in the studies have been contacted for follow up studies up to 14 years later to track how they are going and if they are still together.

This research provides a wealth of information on how couples maintain a positive connection;

the risk factors for handling conflict; and the best approaches for having discussions about perpetual problems. One finding about couples who successfully sustain romance is that in peaceful times there are 20 times more positive interactions to negative interactions. Even in conflict situations the ratio is five positive to one negative.



Your Relationship Reserve Bank

These couples build a reserve of positive experiences which sustains friendship and depth of connection. This in turn fuels romance, passion and good sex. Gottman found three key ingredients to this positive investment strategy:

Friendship and knowing one another: Taking an ongoing interest in one another as individuals makes partners feel interesting and “known”.

Showing fondness & expressing admiration: Through words, touch and deeds each partner shows their care and respect for each other.

Turning toward, not turning away from one another: When one partner makes an attempt at connection, even in simple ways, the other will respond in a way that ‘turns toward’.

Too Much Like a Happy Fairytale?

The conclusion is not just to advocate “being positive” or “being happy”. The Love Lab findings show that negative feelings and behaviours are still part of the picture - just less prominent. You also do not have to always agree with your partner or seek their approval, in fact the study shows there will be disagreement on a wide range of issues.

A positive emotional bank account is helpful in conflict by creating “positive sentiment override” – which means that partners will give each other the benefit of the doubt on hearing a negative statement rather than escalate to conflict. Here is where their relationship investment really pays off – you’ve created a strong reserve of positive experiences so you can safely assume that your partner isn’t out to get you.

The opposite is true with a weak relationship foundation – negative comments are almost always taken as attacks, even neutral comments can be taken the wrong way.

The Love Lab highlights that if you struggle to feel warmth and extension to your partner this is a very important signal, not to be ignored. It also helps to explain how civility can fall from a couple’s repertoire in conflict and how it can return when they nurture their relationship in good times.