

## **Making an Important Life Choice Together: Create a Banana List!**

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During the course of a long-term relationship, committed couples have many important choices to make. Such choices include whether to get married, whether to have children, where to live, where to go on vacation and how to manage money, just to name a few. The way couples work together to make such important life choices can make a world of difference in their mutual satisfaction and partnership over the long run. One powerful way couples can participate together in making important life choices is to “Create a Banana List.”

### **The Origins of “the Banana List”**

My mother-in-law, Ruth, tells a story about her eldest daughter, Amanda, who at a young age would become upset, at times, about having a younger baby sister, Sarah, in the house. Ruth was making breakfast one morning, having put out cereal, milk and a banana for Amanda to eat. Ruth had placed the banana down next to a cereal bowl on the breakfast table. As she attended to Sarah, Ruth looked up and discovered Amanda mashing up the banana with her hands.

Ruth, who in that moment had reached her limit, sent Amanda to her room with a piece of paper, a pencil and explicit instructions. Ruth made two columns with the headings at the top of the paper, “What I like about my life” and “What I don’t like about my life.” Ruth told Amanda that she was to stay in her room until she had completed both lists.

After a period of time, Amanda reappeared, with her lists. Ruth asked her what she had on her lists. On the “What I like about my life” list, Amanda had written, “my dolls” “Christmas presents,” “playing outside,” “ice cream,” “birthday parties,” “my friends,” “reading stories,” and “the Easter bunny.” On the “What I don’t like about my life” list, Amanda had written only one item: “mashed bananas.” By that time, Amanda had pulled herself together and went off playing happily in her room.

In sending Amanda to her room, Ruth had implicitly presented Amanda the choice of being happy or not. By giving Amanda the exercise of creating a banana list, Ruth had asked Amanda to make that choice by considering all the “pros” (the things she liked) and the “cons” (the things she didn’t like) about her life. By the end of her deliberation, Amanda quite naturally had made the choice to be happy. The activity that Ruth had

spontaneously presented to Amanda that morning became known in the family as “Creating a Banana List.”

### **Creating a Banana List**

“Creating a Banana List” is a powerful tool that a couple can use to make important choices together in their relationship. By engaging in this activity together, a couple is able to align powerfully on their choice and co-create their commitment. This choice process is particularly useful after the couple has spent a period of time examining and discussing the various possibilities under consideration. Important choices include such areas as having children, buying a home, moving to a new location, changing careers, creating a business, negotiating family roles, buying or leasing a car, enrolling a child in day care, investing money, choosing a place to worship and planning for retirement. Couples who have an effective way to powerfully make important life choices find themselves experiencing greater possibility, partnership and passion in their relationship and in their lives over the long term.

### **Clarify and Align on the Choices under Consideration**

When you and your partner have an important choice to make that will have major ramifications on your lives, give yourselves ample time to deliberate the specific scenarios under consideration. Take time to clarify and align on each specific, possible scenario that you might be considering, for instance, “buying the colonial home in Brookline” or “buying the Victorian home in Boston.” Using separate pieces of paper or large flip chart paper, write down each of the possibilities you are considering at the top of different sheets of paper. Then draw a line down each page making two columns for “Pros” and for “Cons”. If you use flip chart paper, put the paper on the wall using masking tape and write with brightly colored markers. This makes the whole activity fun and attractive. (Make sure the markers won’t bleed through onto the wall surface). You might even have a third or fourth possibility to examine such as “buying the ranch style home in Newton” or “waiting to buy a home in the future.” When making an important choice, such as buying a house, it is important that you clarify each possible scenario you are considering.

### **Discuss All the “Pros” and All the “Cons” of Each Scenario**

Once you have identified each of the discreet possibilities you are considering, discuss all the pros and the cons for each scenario. It is important that you allow yourselves to say anything and everything you need to say in this process. Under each scenario, list all the positive aspects (pros) and all the negative aspects (cons) of making that choice. Giving yourselves permission to express your deepest fears, persistent worries and greatest hopes allows you to be honest, truthful and fully self-expressed. As each of you expresses a

concern about any of the scenarios, write that concern or negative aspect in the “cons” column of that scenario. If either one of you expresses a positive point about any of the scenarios, write it under the “pros” column for that scenario. When all the pros and cons have been communicated for each scenario, sit back and consider your choice together: “Which possible future are we each going to choose?”

### **Make Your Choice After Considering All the “Pros” and “Cons”**

Choosing after complete consideration of all the pros and cons of each future scenario is a very powerful act. Many times couples make an important life choice by “deciding” on the basis of a consideration (“because it will be fun”), before they have considered all the aspects involved in making that particular choice (e.g., “it is very expensive,” “the weather will be overcast most of the time,” and “it will be lots of fun.”). When everything (all the pros and the cons) has been expressed, each of you can make your own choice, choosing freely and independently of your partner. In this way, each of you can be responsible for what you choose. Given that each of you will have taken the time to complete the Banana List deliberately and consciously, it will be easier for you both to accept and deal with any difficulties that arise after you have aligned and committed to one path.

### **Align on Your Choice and Co-create Your Commitment**

If you each make the same choice, you are aligned in your commitment. It can be a very powerful, exciting and intimate experience for you both when you co-create your commitment to your future. Once you are aligned, take some time and share with each other your enthusiasm and even your fears about the new path you have chosen for your lives together.

If you haven’t made the same choice, then you are not yet aligned and it is advisable that you continue to discuss your hopes, desires and concerns for various scenarios. You can put off making any commitment until some later time after additional thought, consideration and discussion. By giving yourselves more time and by not forcing the choice when you find yourselves not aligned, you might discover other possible scenarios you can consider in another banana list! At some later date, you can create a new banana list based on your most current perspectives and possibilities.

### **The Benefits of Creating a Banana List**

Important choices and commitments require your time, energy and a dedication to a process in order to arrive at a choice you can both own, be responsible for and be happy about. Neither of you want to feel dominated, be unheard or feel as though you have no choice in such important matters. The “Creating a Banana List” exercise gives you a co-

creative process by which you can articulate the various possibilities under consideration, share all of your concerns, hopes, desires and fears and make a joint commitment. Making such important life choices in this way allows you and your partner access to a future of possibility, partnership and passion.

### **A Personal Story: Choosing to Move to The Netherlands (or Not)**

My wife, Martha, and I used the “Creating a Banana List” exercise to assist us in making one of the most difficult choices we have had to make in our 33 years of marriage. In the late winter of 2002, Martha was given the opportunity to consider a new job in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. We were living in Hartford at the time in a beautiful colonial home in the West End of the city where we had raised three children, had cultivated many friendships and built our professional lives. I was a psychologist and marriage and family therapist in independent practice and Martha was a professional trainer with a financial services corporation. We were well ensconced in the community and I could not for a moment imagine making any significant change until Martha was offered this exciting job opportunity in Amsterdam. To assist us, we created a Banana List.

We generated the Banana List by looking at the pros and cons of the choices we had before us. We first wrote down the different possible futures we were considering. For us, it was easy: Either make a whole-scale change and move to Amsterdam or stay in Hartford with the life we knew. Martha and I made a rule that we would communicate everything we needed to say about either of these possibilities while we discussed each scenario. We granted ourselves the freedom and the permission to express our deepest fears and worries as well as our hopes and desires. When I expressed the concern that our children might be upset with us in moving to Amsterdam, we wrote that on “move to Amsterdam” list under cons. When Martha expressed excitement about traveling in Europe, we wrote that on the same list, but under pros. After a fairly lengthy discussion, we had all of our concerns and hopes registered for each of the two possible outcomes. Although our lists were much longer and more detailed, they looked something like the lists in the table below.

After considering all the pros and cons, we sat back and asked ourselves the question: “Which path am I (we) going to choose?” We found this to a very powerful process. We gave each other the freedom to make the choice individually and, fortunately for us, each of us chose to move to Amsterdam. We were aligned and excited about our future. If we hadn’t been aligned, we would have gone back to the drawing board.

Making the choice together to uproot our family and to go to Europe was a major positive step in our expatriate experience. After our family arrived in Amsterdam, Martha and I were better able to be responsible and to deal effectively with all the adjustment issues because we had both chosen to be there. Personally, I could not blame them on Martha’s

job or our financial situation or any circumstance in our lives. I had chosen as had Martha, together in partnership.

Move to Amsterdam		Stay in Hartford	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
<i>We can travel in Europe</i>	<i>Our children may be upset</i>	<i>We won't have to deal with all the changes</i>	<i>We will still be in Hartford</i>
<i>Living in Europe will be an adventure</i>	<i>We will miss out friends &amp; family</i>	<i>We will be near our friends and family</i>	<i>Life will be predictable</i>
<i>We can ski in the Alps</i>	<i>We will have to deal with all the uncertainty</i>	<i>We can get to Red Sox games (or see them on TV)</i>	<i>Martha will give up a possible once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity</i>
<i>We can learn to speak Dutch</i>	<i>We will miss our beautiful home</i>		

Choosing powerfully by “Creating a Banana List” paid-off over the next four years. Martha and I were better able to continuously accept what we had chosen and assist the children in learning to live in a foreign country. Instead of feeling victimized or resentful when things were difficult, we felt we could deal with all the challenges that were facing us without sacrificing our happiness. We were able to be effective in coping with many of the common dilemmas that confront expatriate couples and families: feeling like you belong, adjusting to life in a new country, restoring family stability and co-creating a long-term future.

Being aligned and responsible for the choice we had made gave us the freedom to fully immerse ourselves in our new lives. I began taking over the household tasks at home, learning to cook, learning to speak Dutch, reading and writing routinely, and designing a new career as a professional coach. I also started my own international coaching business. Martha was able to advance her career by working in an international corporation in Amsterdam and we were able to travel with our family to many different countries throughout Europe. Having simply engaged together in “Creating a Banana List” and making our choice after careful consideration of all the pros and cons, Martha and I were able to invent a whole new future for ourselves and for our family.

