

The Psychology Behind Love and Romance

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by South University

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We spend our lives craving it, searching for it, and talking about it. Its meaning is felt more than it is clearly expressed. It's called the greatest virtue.

It's love.

Love is fascinating and complex. Romantic love, in particular, seems to be a beautiful mystery we find hard to explain.

Although poets and songwriters can put many of our romantic thoughts and feelings into words, love is so inexplicable we need the help of science to explain it. After all, psychologists have a lot to say about how and why people fall in love.

This is Your Brain on Love

During romantic love there are many changes that both men and women experience. It seems rather inaccurate to say "falling in love" because experiencing love is more of a high that puts people on cloud nine.

"The first step in the process of falling in love is the initial attraction," says Elizabeth Kane, a [South University](#) adjunct faculty member who teaches clinical [psychology](#) and behavioral science. "It's the powerful moment when we meet another person and feel energized and are immediately aware of our heart pounding."

According to licensed psychologist Dr. Rachel Needle, specific chemical substances such as oxytocin, phenethylamine, and dopamine, have been found to play a role in human experiences and behaviors that are associated with love. They function similar to amphetamine, making us alert, excited, and wanting to bond.

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"Falling in love is associated with increased energy, narrowing of mental focus, sometimes sweaty palms, light-headedness, racing heart, and a lot of positive feelings," says Needle, an associate professor and coordinator of Clinical Experiences at [South University, West Palm Beach](#).

In his book, *The Brain in Love: 12 Lessons to Enhance Your Love Life*, Dr. Daniel G. Amen says "that romantic love and infatuation are not so much of an emotion as they are motivational drives that are part of the brain's reward system."

Kane agrees, saying that the human brain supports falling in love, which is why we have such a strong physiological response when we are attracted to another. Once a romantic couple begins to spend time together, they are in a sort of love euphoria.

“A person newly in love sees the world through the lens of love and most everything is tolerable and everything their partner does is delightful,” says Kane, who is also a marriage and family therapist.

According to the triangular theory of love developed by psychologist Robert Sternberg, the three components of love are intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy encompasses feelings of attachment, closeness, connectedness, and bondedness. Passion encompasses drives connected to both limerance and sexual attraction. Commitment encompasses, in the short term, the decision to remain with another, and in the long term, the shared achievements and plans made with that other person.

“Romantic love evolves when one feels a sense of interdependence, attachment, and that their psychological needs are being met,” Kane says. “Some researchers say oxytocin plays a part in the evolution of romantic love as it is released in the brain during orgasm, which contributes to the couple’s ability to bond with one another.”

They Call Me Dr. Love

Understanding the psychology behind falling in love can also help therapists treat people dealing with heartbreak.

When a therapist understands the meaning that romantic love has in one’s life and the traumatic effects of the abrupt and sometimes unexpected end of a relationship, they can address their client’s ability to move on and strengthen their resiliency.

“Moving beyond the pain of a failed relationship requires a shift of focus back on one’s self and to their own unique ability to give and receive love,” Kane says. “When we understand how we fall in love, we can connect to the difficulties in moving forward after our heart has been broken. We can then connect again to the beauty of the experience and an optimistic understanding that if it has happened to us once that it can happen again to us.”



Needle says therapists need to understand each individual and how they fell in love and what they currently experience in terms of heartbreak in order to best help them work through that difficult time.

“A therapist can be helpful in supporting clients in understanding and learning from the past,” Needle states. “Many people choose similar partners from relationship to relationship, but are unaware of it, as well as why these relationships continue to lead to disappointment and not last.”

Keeping the Fires Burning

Some of us may have committed ourselves to the fantastical notion that romance is just an act of spontaneous combustion. But, Needle says it’s time to ditch the myth.

“Get rid of the myth that these things should just happen spontaneously and that there is something wrong with the relationship because you are not all over each other every minute, as when you began the relationship,” Needle says. “The truth is that you have to put in time and energy and make a conscious effort to sustain the relationship and the passion.”

Healthy relationships require regular communication, she adds.

“Basic communication with your partner on a daily basis is important to continue connecting on an emotional level,” Needle says. “Also, remind yourself why you fell in love with this person.”

Predictability can also dampen desires, so couples should strive to keep a sense of adventure and surprise alive in their relationships.

“Break the predictable pattern every so often,” Needle advises.

People can let their partners know how much they love them by the little things they do every day.

“To be romantic is to make a choice to wake up each day and ask yourself what you can do today to let your lover know they are adored,” Kane says. “Have fun in your romance and remember that the more effort you put into your romantic relationship, the more love you will receive in return. Be the partner that you seek and live a life filled with passion and romance.”