

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Friendship, Love, and Sexual Intimacy

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Love can cause much happiness and much pain. For many couples, a good definition of a *great marriage* is that the partners are *best friends*. This is No. 8 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Friendship, Love, and Sexual Intimacy

Few words in the English dictionary have inspired as much discussion, celebration, and confusion over the years as the word *love*. In our discussion here, we will begin by discussing the notion of *love at first sight*, continue by unraveling the differences between friendship and love, and follow up by discussing eight different types of loving relationships. From there we will move on to a look at emotional intimacy: how emotional intimacy compares to sexual intimacy; how emotional intimacy can be developed in a relationship; and how to maintain emotional intimacy in a marriage through the passage of time.

Love at First Sight

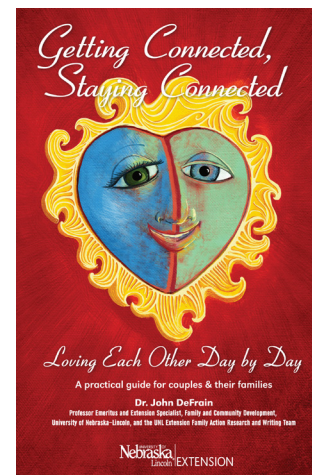
Some couples will tell you that it was love at first sight. Some will say that it was love at first sight for one but not the other. Some will say it was infatuation or desire at first sight or joke that it was *lust* at first sight, but not love. Some will say that they were aware of each other for many months or many years but did not become interested in each other as a partner until much later. Some will say they were just friends and the friendship developed slowly over time into love.

In other descriptions of how couples get together, we learn of those who were in bed with each other on the first date, and of others who did not make love until they were

married. Some will say that just because they were in bed didn't mean love had anything to do with it at all. Some will say they *fell in love* quickly but *grew into love* slowly over time. The stories partners tell about how they met and how love developed in the relationship are fascinating and remarkably unique, but there are some common patterns.

Our view is that infatuation, romance, and sexual desire play a great part early in a relationship. Human behavior, by its very nature, is rooted in biology, and our bodies have enormous control over our thinking and our behavior. Watch a nature program on television and it is quite easy to see similarities between the birds or bees or elk or cheetahs in their sexual behavior and the sexual behavior of humans. We might aspire as a species to a higher and more noble order of behavior, but the fact is that we often fall remarkably far from the mark.

Looking at human relationships from this relatively realistic perspective, we conclude that *falling in love* is easy but *staying in love* is much more difficult. Our bodies make falling in love a relatively simple prospect, but the area of our brain that controls rational, clear, and logical thinking has to be involved through the months and years if we are going to be able to make this love grow into something deeper and more lasting.



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

Friendship Compared to Love

Love causes an enormous amount of happiness in the world and an enormous amount of pain. In an ideal world, human beings would take the time needed to create a loving relationship with each other. The foundation of this relationship would be friendship. In our ongoing research on *great marriages*, we are seeing that for many couples the best definition of a great marriage is that the partners are *best friends*.

How do friendship and love compare? Keith E. Davis, a psychologist, has done perhaps the most creative research in this area. He has found, basically, that love is friendship with a few added components.

Friendship develops between two individuals who view each other as equals. There are eight important elements to a successful friendship:

- *Enjoyment*. Friends like to be with each other. Though they have occasional disagreements, they tend to get along very well, most of the time.
- *Acceptance*. Friends accept each other for who they are and don't waste much time trying to change each other.
- *Trust*. Friends can depend on each other to act in the other person's best interest.
- *Respect*. Friends hold each other in high regard, believing that each has good judgment and considerable ability in life.
- *Mutual assistance*. Friends help each other when called upon and are there for each other in difficult times.
- *Confiding in each other*. Friends talk with each other about their experiences in life and are comfortable expressing their feelings.
- *Understanding*. Friends know a great deal about each other's values, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. They are open with each other and this openness leads to understanding.
- *Spontaneity*. Friends can *be real* with each other and don't have to play games or try to be something they really aren't.

Friendship, we have seen, is like love but love has extra components.

And what are the added components? Davis argues that if you have the eight components of friendship and pair them with two more broad components, *passion* and *caring*, you have love. He explains these two extra components this way:

- *Passion* includes fascination for the other person, sexual desire, and a desire for exclusiveness. The individual in love is preoccupied with the loved one, cannot stop thinking about the other person, and wants to be with the person all the time. Sexual desire is the need to touch each other, hold each other, and make love. But some couples may not engage in sexual intercourse until after marriage because of their religious beliefs, moral

reasons, or practical considerations. Exclusiveness is the need to have the loved one to yourself and no one else. In most cases this is a relatively healthy need, but, of course, it can get out of hand for a number of reasons. For example, extreme jealousy can be damaging to both partners and has to be controlled. Also, individuals come to a relationship not truly as individuals but as a part of an extended family. This family of origin should not be cast aside by passion. People also come with friends and jobs and activities that they love and these should not be sacrificed to passion either.

- *Caring* has two components: being an advocate for one's partner and giving one's utmost to the partner. Those in love are champions and advocates for their loved ones, defending and supporting their partner through good times and bad. Giving one's utmost is easy for people who are in love; on some occasions they give to the point of self-sacrifice.

The loss of a friend, especially the loss of a loved one, can be a devastating experience. We all are familiar with stories of elderly men or women who withered and died soon after the death of their partner. Illness and even suicide can follow the loss. Though love is more than friendship, both kinds of human relationships are very important in people's lives.

The Love Triangle: Eight Types of Love Relationships

Another useful way of thinking about love has been developed by psychologist Robert J. Sternberg and his colleagues. The researchers call this the **love triangle**, with the three sides labeled *commitment*, *intimacy*, and *passion*. If you can't see the love triangle in your mind, just take a pencil and draw a triangle, then label each of the three sides:

- *Commitment* is a sense of attachment to another person. Commitment takes time to develop. The process begins slowly and increases at a faster rate if the relationship is a positive one. The expressed level of commitment individuals have for each other increases as the relationship moves through various stages: dating to engagement, engagement to marriage. Commitment is also expressed when partners stay faithful to each other in spite of temptation, and when the relationship endures through very difficult times.
- *Intimacy* includes the sharing of feelings and providing emotional support for each other. Emotionally intimate partners usually have a high level of self-disclosure in the relationship and are not afraid of talking about their beliefs and feelings openly. Intimacy increases gradually over time as the partners feel closer to each other and the relationship matures. Few couples are likely to share everything about themselves — most everyone seems to need some private space in life — but in a well-developed positive relationship most areas are open for discussion. When we open up, sharing our thoughts and feelings, and are treated with respect and

kindness, our trust for each other grows and a strong emotional bond is formed. It may seem strange, but by expressing feelings of weakness and vulnerability we gain support and strength from each other and the relationship is strengthened.

- *Passion*, expressed by kissing, touching, hugging, and sexual intercourse, is linked with physiological arousal of the body. Passionate feelings are indescribable reactions; they build up quickly and can also disappear quickly. Passion, generated by chemical interactions in our bodies, can be a wonderful feeling. There is no denying it. Passion makes the world go round. But it needs to be recognized that passion can also have a drug-like effect on us and for some can turn into a serious and damaging addiction. In some cases, when passion has run its course a person can feel irritable and depressed.

Summing up, Sternberg's love triangle includes commitment, intimacy, and passion. When you combine these various components of love in different ways, Sternberg believes that you end up with eight different kinds of love: non-love, liking, infatuation, empty love, romantic love, fatuous love, companionate love, and consummate love. Let's look at each type of love in more detail:

- *Non-love* is the absence of all three components, commitment, intimacy, and passion.
- *Liking* is a type of relationship in which there is intimacy but no commitment or passion.
- *Infatuation* is a state involving passion without commitment or intimacy.
- *Empty love* is defined by Sternberg as commitment without intimacy or passion.
- *Romantic love* has intimacy and passion without commitment.

- *Fatuous love* is a state in which the couple has become committed to each other because of their passionate feelings but they have not had the time to develop genuine intimacy with each other.
- *Companionate love* describes many couples who have been married for several years. The relationship is high on commitment and intimacy and low on the passion that may have fueled their early marriage.
- *Consummate love* is a complete form of love and the goal of most couples, according to Sternberg, for it combines all three components: commitment, intimacy, and passion.

Using Sternberg's love triangle, think about your own experiences with love. How would you label each of them? Why?

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

Resources

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