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Romantic Love, From Chemistry to Conscious Choice

The Many Faces of Love

There's plenty of love to go around.

Ancient Greek philosophy already did the hard work and defined different types of love:

- 🌀 **Physical** attraction: sexual desire
- 🌀 **Soul** Connection: platonic, spiritual feeling
- 🌀 **Devoted** love: selfish care for others
- 🌀 **Mature** love: long-term, day-to-day partnerships
- 🌀 **Playful** love: carefree seduction
- 🌀 **Obsessive** love: unhealthy and unbalanced connections
- 🌀 **Creative** endeavors: do something with love
- 🌀 **Self-love**: healthy self-esteem
- 🌀 **Unconditional** love: unselfish love that does not depend on external factors

There is plenty to learn and language and science can give us a helpful map, but our relationships are the living experience. Knowing what type of love we are experiencing is key.

Let's look at romantic love.

Love is a Drug

There's chemistry behind every step of romantic love. The emotions we feel when we fall in love, develop attachments, build relationships and even break up are all linked to hormones and brain chemistry. The longing for romantic love is not just an artist's fantasy, it is a fundamental human need just like food, water and warmth. Love triggers a whole cocktail of neurochemicals because it is relevant to survival. There are chemical neurotransmitters and hormones that have been identified as being critical for this process.

Love comes in Stages

Stage 1: Attraction

This is the 'butterfly' stage of chemistry and lust, the initial spark. It is driven by testosterone (masculine) and estrogen (feminine), the sex hormones. It's main job is, through desire, notice potential mates for reproduction. We can feel the pull to someone before having even spoken to them. Attraction doesn't care about compatibility. It's instinctive.

Chemistry is a signal, but not always a reliable one. In this early stage, there is a lot of emphasis on the physical experience. Our nervous system recognizes a familiar emotional pattern, because it is known from childhood. Remember that chemistry is an invitation, not a destination.

Stage 2: Romance

This is the 'honeymoon' stage of falling in love, powered by dopamine (the pleasure and reward hormone) and norepinephrine (the arousal hormone). It brings euphoria, obsession and idealized adoration of your new partner.

Stage 3: Disillusion

This is the 'reality' stage where rose-colored glasses fade. This stage reveals flaws and conflicts, but it's also a chance to build an authentic connection.

Stage 4: Attachment

This is the 'belonging' stage, driven by oxytocin (the cuddle hormone) and vasopressin (the bonding hormone), the love hormones. In long-term connections it provides a feeling of 'home' through touch, eye contact, shared experience and security. Deeper bonds form over time, fostering trust, interdependence and commitment for the long haul. This stage also comes with the ability to resolve conflict. Our attachment style — formed during childhood — significantly impacts how we build connections in adult relationships.

Stage 5: Stable Love

This is the 'mature' stage of an enduring partnership. It is characterized by deep commitment, trust, mutual respect and emotional union and is built on shared growth and rituals. This

is the stage where love gradually shifts from something we feel to something we consciously create.

Give it Time

Attraction and intense romance are powerful biological forces, but they do not necessarily tell us whether a relationship will flourish over time. As the initial excitement gradually settles, partners begin to discover each other's values, habits and ways of handling life's challenges.

Research also suggests that couples who take more time to get to know one another before marrying tend to have more stable, long-lasting relationships. Allowing a relationship to develop naturally gives both partners the opportunity to build trust, deepen emotional intimacy and determine whether they are truly compatible beyond the initial chemistry.

Exploring Passionate Love

We all experience romantic love differently. For some people it feels all-consuming, while for others it develops more gradually. Passionate love also changes over time, often becoming calmer and deeper as a relationship matures.

If you're curious about your own experience, you can explore the **Passionate Love Scale (PLS)**, developed by psychologists Elaine Hatfield and Susan Sprecher. The questionnaire explores different aspects of passionate love, including emotional closeness, longing for a partner, idealization and

the desire to be together. Although it was originally designed for scientific research, it can also be an interesting tool for personal reflection.

Passionate Love Scale (PLS)

<https://www.midss.org/content/passionate-love-scale-pls>

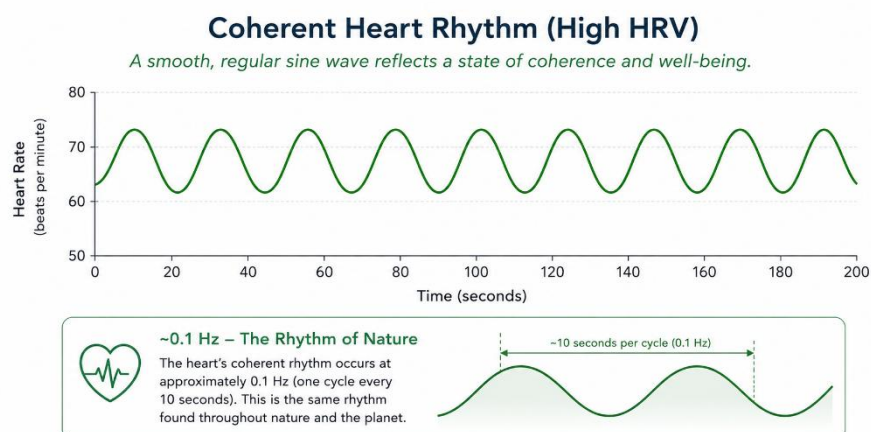
Source

Hatfield, E., & Sprecher, S. (1986). Measuring passionate love in intimate relationships. *Measuring Passionate Love in Intimate Relationships*

Remember that there are no right or wrong scores. Passionate love naturally evolves throughout a relationship and a quieter, more stable love can be just as meaningful as the intense excitement of the early stages.

The Heart is in Love

Love does more than influence our thoughts and emotions—it also changes our physiology. Whatever we are feeling is reflected in our **Heart Rate Variability (HRV)**, the natural variation in time between heartbeats. During emotions such as appreciation, compassion and love, the heart's rhythm becomes smooth and coherent, resembling a gentle rolling sine wave.



This coherent pattern supports our overall well-being and helps synchronize the heart, brain and body into a more harmonious state.

One way to encourage this state is through heart-focused breathing. As our breathing naturally slows, it approaches a rhythm of approximately 0,1 Hz, a frequency often referred to as the rhythm of nature because it appears throughout many biological systems. In this coherent state, communication between the heart and brain becomes more efficient, our energetic field becomes more ordered and genuine heart-to-heart connection with our partner becomes easier to experience.

The Attraction Blueprint

Helen Fischer, a well-known American biological anthropologist, studied the neural chemistry of romantic love and attachment and human biologically-based personality styles.

Her research suggests that there are **4 basic brain systems** that contribute essential components to our natural personality: the **dopamine**, **serotonin**, **testosterone** and **estrogen** systems.

Each is associated with a specific set of biologically-based personality traits:

- 🔵 **Explorers:** Explorers express more of the traits linked with the **dopamine** system. They tend to be curious, creative, spontaneous, energetic, daring, risk-taking, mentally flexible, enthusiastic and independent. They like novelty

and adventure; they think outside the box and they inspire. They make good entrepreneurs, artists and entertainers, as well as charismatic leaders.

🧠 **Builders:** Builders express more of the traits linked with the **serotonin** system. They tend to be traditional, conventional and cautious (but not scared); they observe social norms. They follow the rules, respect authority, enjoy making plans and schedules and are conscientious and risk averse. They are concrete and logistical thinkers who focus on the details and the process; they are stabilizers. They make superb managers and soldiers and tend to be authoritative leaders.

🧠 **Directors:** Directors express more of the traits linked with the **testosterone** system. These men and women tend to be analytical, logical, direct, decisive, skeptical, tough-minded, emotionally contained, rank oriented and competitive, as well as experimental and excellent at understanding 'rule-based systems'—including engineering, math, computers, mechanics and/or music. They are strategic thinkers and Commanding Leaders.

🧠 **Negotiators:** Negotiators express more of the traits in the **estrogen** system. They are synthetic, holistic, contextual, long term and imaginative thinkers. They are good at reading postures, gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice. And they excel at people skills—being intuitive, insightful, trusting, empathetic and nurturing. They make excellent educators, medical workers and salespeople and they tend to be diplomatic leaders with the ability to broker consensus.

Explorers and **Builders** are drawn to people like themselves, while **Directors** and **Negotiators** are drawn to their opposites.

If you are interested in exploring your own temperament profile, you can take the official **Fisher Temperament Inventory**. The FTI is a measure of personality based on the idea that behavior is influenced by the dominance of neurotransmitters in the brain.

The test consists of statements about you that you must rate on a 4 point scale of how much you agree with each.

Fisher Temperament Inventory (FTI)

<https://theanatomyoflove.com/relationship-quizzes/helen-fishers-personality-test/>

Source

Brown LL, Acevedo B, Fisher HE (2013). Neural Correlates of Four Broad Temperament Dimensions: Testing Predictions for a Novel Construct of Personality. PLoS ONE 8(11): e78734.

The 5 things we all look for in a partner:

1. Respect
2. Trust
3. Humor
4. Availability (practical, emotional, financial)
5. Physical attraction

Emotionally mature and good communication skills complete the list.

Conflict

As the initial chemistry fades and attachment deepens, conflict becomes inevitable. Conflict is not necessarily a sign that love has failed. In many cases it is the mechanism through which two people learn to build a deeper and more authentic connection.

Conflict in a relationship shows the wounds both partners share. Relationships have a unique ability to reveal parts of ourselves that remain hidden when we are alone. Our fears, insecurities, attachment patterns and emotional wounds often surface most strongly in intimate relationships. Love therefore does not merely make us happy. It also invites us to grow.

While personality differences certainly play a role, the challenges of modern life are equally important. Chronic stress keeps our nervous system in survival mode, digital technologies compete constantly for our attention and the supportive networks that once surrounded relationships have largely disappeared. Together, these changes make genuine connection more difficult and conflict more likely. Understanding these influences helps us see that many relationship struggles are the result of living in an environment that no longer naturally supports love.

Chronic stress

When we live in chronic stress, the attachment system is turned off. We then physically struggle to access the

neurological state that allows for connection, i.e. warmth, tenderness, openness, empathy.

Social media

Social media platforms are designed to capture and hold our attention with cheap dopamine hits. Constant stimulation, comparison and digital overload can increase stress while reducing opportunities for genuine connection. As we become desensitized over time, making real-world relationships may feel less exciting than they truly are. Simultaneously, meaningful connection becomes harder to build.

The container

Historically family gave support, friends gave companionship, community gave belonging and mentors gave wisdom, but at present our container for love has become much smaller. We no longer live in an extended environment. Therefore, we unconsciously expect our partner to provide romance, friendship, therapy, purpose, entertainment, emotional regulation, parenting and financial stability. That is a huge burden to put on someone you love.

The Anatomy of Love

Love is more than an emotion—it is a biological process involving our body, our brain and our nervous system. Understanding how love develops, helps us recognize what we are experiencing, why we are attracted to certain people and how secure, lasting relationships are formed. By becoming aware of

these natural processes, we can respond with greater understanding, self-compassion and healthier choices.

- 🌀 Notice your body

- 🌀 Stage 1: **Attraction** is felt in our chest and gut as butterflies, excitement, desire and anticipation

- 🌀 Stage 2: **Romance** is processed in our mind as a dopamine-driven focus and is experienced as idealization, fantasies, intrusive thoughts and longing

- 🌀 Stage 3: **Desillusion** is perceived in the nervous system as conflict, insecurity and old emerging attachment patterns, often felt as tension in the chest, stomach, throat or shoulders, increased heart rate or a fight-flight-freeze response

- 🌀 Stage 4: **Attachment** is recognized as a sense of safety, calm, closeness and ease and often experienced as warmth in the chest, relaxed breathing and a settled body

- 🌀 Stage 5: **Stable Love** is embodied as an overall feeling of peace, trust, openness and connection

- 🌀 Recognize patterns

If we repeatedly attract the same type of partner, it may reflect familiar patterns within our brain and nervous system. We are often drawn to what feels familiar, even when it is not healthy. Recognizing these patterns gives us the opportunity to make more conscious relationship choices.

🌀 Practice self-compassion

Whatever we are feeling, it makes biological sense, so we'd better treat ourselves with kindness rather than self-judgment.

Real love

Real love is a behavior, a choice, a decision, an action and a way of being. Things we usually need, to have a successful long-term relationship, include compatibility, connection, strong communication skills, a little chemistry and a shared vision of the future. First connect with ourselves and ask what would really make us happy. We all need trust and safety, honesty and financial responsibility, but for real connection we need someone who we can completely be ourselves with, share unconditional love, feel 'at home' with and display respect and devotion. **Real love is choosing someone every day ... over and over again.**

Key Takeaway

Attraction may bring two people together, but over time real love becomes less about what we receive and more about the connection we create. At its deepest level, love is the experience of moving beyond separation and discovering a sense of unity with another human being while remaining fully ourselves.



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