

## Is it Lust, Love or Chemistry?

*“When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will stay in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition constantly till death do them part.” - George Bernard Shaw*

That was my view of love 47 years ago when I met Susan my wife. I was instantly smitten and so was she. I was working at Arizona State University and doing graduate work in chemistry. Susan was working with the developmentally disabled and 23 years old. We both wanted to settle down. We had a whirlwind romance and wedding, meeting in September and married by December. We were in love!

Little did either of us understand what attraction love, also called Eros love or romantic love, was all about. We simply knew we were experiencing powerful feelings of connection and attraction. But it wasn't long after the wedding day when the romantic feelings declined. I was confused. “How come we don't still feel the love? Are we falling out of love so soon?” Our lack of understanding caused great conflict and confusion. Our marriage faltered. This is a common challenge for many marriages. I believe a proper understanding of romantic love and its role in our lives is necessary in helping us build a more solid foundation for marriage. Consider the following aspects of romantic love.

**1. Romantic love is predictable.** When two people are experiencing the strong feelings of romance and connection, four distinct phenomena are at work in the relationship. The stronger they are experienced, the stronger the attraction. Each of these help connect the couple on a deeply personal level.

- Recognition Phenomena: just met but feel I already know you
- Timelessness Phenomena: I can't remember when I didn't know you
- Reunification Phenomena: I no longer feel alone, I feel whole and complete
- Necessity Phenomena: I can't live without you

Love songs, poems, movies and novels have memorialized these experiences in our culture. This is where much of my notion of love came from. The music and movies of my youth shaped my view of love. What shaped yours?

**2. Romantic love is chemical.** Researchers have found that couples experiencing this form of love are under the influence of key chemical compounds that produce the powerful feelings of attraction and connection with accompanying phenomena. When attracted to another our bodies release abundant amounts of neurotransmitters and natural narcotics. Positive and heightened feelings of well-being are a result. Couples in love often experience the following.

A rosy outlook, rapid pulse, increased energy, heightened perception, euphoria, a sense of mystical oneness, good feelings, a sense of well-being/security and a natural high.

Another chemical, oxytocin, is also released. It is often called the bonding chemical because it creates feelings of “warm fuzzies” that urges us to cuddle and connect. It also enhances sensations during and after the act of marriage.

Wow! No wonder romantic love is so beguiling.

**3. Romantic love usually lasts between 18 and 24 months.** Similar to the phenomena of drug addicts needing more and more of their drug of choice to get the same high, our bodies accommodate to the extra release of chemicals and soon their abundance does not produce the same intense feelings. The romance declines. However, it can be rekindled on occasion when special efforts are made to communicate love, care and appreciation to our partner. Date nights, gifts, flowers, cards, favors and quality time together are a few of the common ways romantic love can again be encouraged. The Chapmans have an excellent book on how to make our partners “feel” loved. It’s titled *The Five Love Languages*. When we receive our love language, we not only know we are loved, we feel the love. This in turn encourages release of the romance and attraction chemicals.

**4. Romantic love is Biblical.** I believe that the phenomena of attraction is what God created to ensure we powerfully “cleave” to one another and “become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). It is meant to draw us to each other. Song of Solomon has a number of passages that allude to this type of love. However, the other facets of love and relationship - friendship, commitment, sacrifice, communication, etc. - must be developed to grow the marriage and keep us together. Susan and I did not realize this truth when first married. We thought that as long as we had the romantic love feelings, everything else would work. It was after we surrendered our lives to Christ and grew in Biblical insight and knowledge that we and our marriage matured.

I’m reminded of a quote from German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “God never said to fall in love and get married. He said get married and learn how to love.” Maybe another way to view this is to say “Fall in love and get married and then learn how to truly love!”