

Love matters

How to build a
better relationship



The two biggest personal issues in life are both searches: the search for an intimate loving relationship, and the search for deep meaning and purpose. Often, wrongly, the first of these is confused with the second. They are not the same thing.

A lot of people struggle to find and maintain deep, lasting love. And, as we've examined in another essay - *Failure and the Great Hurdle* - there has been an abysmal lack of success in personal development.

Part of the problem in both areas is a lack of really good role models - but let's focus here just on love. How many of us, growing up as children, benefitted from parents who demonstrated a wonderful loving relationship between themselves? Was there true togetherness? Or were disagreements, yelling matches, extended periods of silence, point scoring, manipulation, major differences in approach, etc etc the norm? Children are sponges. Monkey do what monkey see.

As adults, the various examples of "loving" relationships around us aren't great. It's therefore not surprising that many people struggle to know how to approach, build, and maintain a genuinely loving relationship. The expression "groping in the dark" is pertinent, and remains true long after the sexual fumbling of youth has been sorted. Friends usually don't help, as they're just as confused or shut off.

We all yearn to love and be loved. Falling in love is easy. But, sadly, falling out of love happens just as readily. Sometimes it quickly goes wrong; on other occasions, it just slips and fades away over time. It can be a chaotic mess, or just become mediocre. There's truth when people say they're "crazy in love" and that "love is blind". Perhaps there's a degree of infatuation, especially when you're young, or merely relief that someone wants to be with you?

When you're open to love, there must be vulnerability. There's no guarantee you'll be loved back. And it could all go wrong. There's always a risk. For the majority of people, it does end, sometimes badly. There's disappointment and hurt. As Rod Stewart sang: "The first cut is the deepest." Your heart can be torn apart. This can result in some degree of shutting off, a fear of future rejection, a reluctance to commit. There might be erosion of trust. It's easy to become "damaged goods". You won't be the same when you try to love again.

The sensible approach is to learn and be better next time. But this is rarely the case. Instead, there's wariness based on self-protection. Therefore, you're immediately at a disadvantage. Any "learning" is negative, as you've been pushed backwards by the previous loss and hurt. And this gets worse and worse after love repeatedly goes wrong. Remember that it's not just you who's getting messed up in life; your partner will also be "damaged goods". So it's effectively "double trouble". The sad reality is that people usually "make do" with something less than love, simply because nobody's brave enough to fully open up and be totally vulnerable again. Everything is "qualified" with unspoken defence barriers. What is considered to be "compatibility" has more to do with these limitations, so you can feel more or less "safe". You've turned your back on the potential of a fullness of togetherness, settling for second best or less.

The harm actually began well before you first fell in love. As the poet Philip Larkin wrote: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had. And add some extra, just for you." You carried the "hurt child" into adulthood, which unsurprisingly had an influence on your relationships. That's the actual reality, despite any attempt to cover it up or deny what's what.

What you should be developing in yourself, in terms of becoming a better human being, is conveniently displaced onto someone else. Phrases like “you complete me” and “my other half” might sound nice, but they actually show that some major inadequacy exists. The hope is foolishly displaced. And yet you expect all to be wonderful. Such an idea is unrealistic, even preposterous. Where gaps exist, problems will occur. Doubling the deficiency isn't going to solve anything, just as two wrongs don't make a right.

There's a debate among “30-something” single women about looking for Mr Right. (I'm being justifiably “sexist” here because most men in this age range, who haven't already committed, have no intention of “settling down” or seeking Mrs Right. They prefer to be players or loners.) Do you keep on waiting and hoping to find Prince Charming? Or do you accept Mr Steady-Who'll-Do? The very fact that society has such a discussion illustrates how far it remains from becoming mature. The situation is sad and desperate. Again, the explanation includes avoiding major issues like the “hurt child” and becoming “damaged goods”. When dysfunction is ignored - instead, accepted and normalised - don't expect it to magically disappear. Sooner or later, consequences happen.

Another myth is that love should be “easy”. Those who spread this rumour, plus those who believe it, obviously know nothing. It takes a lot of on-going hard work to build a lasting intimate relationship. First, each individual has to take responsibility for sorting out his or her own psychological baggage. Then you put in whatever effort is required to achieve and maintain loving togetherness. If you're tempted not to bother, preferring laziness, then don't moan about a mediocre life and its inherent problems - which is not love.

A lot of couples stay together, grateful for the stability of companionship. They find cohabitation okay, better than being on their own, or having to get back into the dating marketplace. But it's a bit dull, not exactly the love of dreams. You're unlikely to be enjoying multiple orgasms with Steady Eddy, let alone leaping out of bed every morning looking forward to the day ahead.

And now we've nicely moved on to the hot topic of sexual intimacy - which is important, as implied by the photo on the title page, regardless of whether you've got a shapely bum or not. First, let's quickly look at that initial question of “How long do I wait?” Whereas there's no right or wrong answer, there is an advantage in getting to know someone before leaping into bed. This cautious approach could prevent some mistakes being made, as someone isn't always the person they seem or pretend to be on first meeting. That said, the extreme of “waiting until marriage”, which is an outdated religious notion, might end in disaster. Sexual compatibility is an essential part of an intimate, loving relationship - otherwise the line is getting blurred between love and friendship. (Of course, I'm not at all intending to limit the wider interpretation of the word “love”, nor am I suggesting that your lover can't also be your best friend.)

It's crucial to be open when exploring your bodies. Sexuality is very pleasurable, considerably deepened when there is love. Lovemaking is the expression of intimately sharing everything. You must give as much as you can to your partner (or partners, if it's a polyamorous family). Don't hold back. If there are any problems that you can't overcome between you, seek help by first talking honestly to your doctor.

When the “honeymoon period” is over, during which time you'll probably have been at it wherever and whenever like the proverbial rabbits, learn to keep it up. (Obviously, pun intended.) It's not unusual for those aged 80 and above to be regularly enjoying their sexuality. It's worth repeating: give as much as you can. Make the effort and be appreciative.

Now to the boring subject of money. People can often be classified as either “savers” or “spenders”. It’s best if you’re in the same category because there might otherwise be problems. Overspending - living beyond your means - is dysfunctional and there will be consequences ahead. If you spend too much, your partner will feel the need to compensate, and you’ll perhaps think you’re being “deprived” or “held back” if/when the brakes are applied. It’s best to be on the same page. Financial difficulties are cited as a common cause of relationship breakdown.

The “we” of connection is the “glue” of togetherness. Loyalty matters, so be on your partner’s side. Having a shared dream is important - or, at least, there has to be pride in, and support of, a partner’s dream when it isn’t physically shared. You should have the same, or similar, values. But, at this point, with values, we get into a potentially complex area that’s difficult to write about in a few words. As humans and society in general are still at an immature stage, the embracing of ethical principles is inconsistent. The normalised self-orientated psychology of “me, first” is riddled with contradictions and hypocrisy. William Shakespeare’s wise words of “To thine own self be true” and “Be just and fear not” are still a vague goal for many, or not yet considered. Values are quickly forgotten at times of weakness or inconvenience. “I want” dominates, together with avoidance. Values are underappreciated, yet they are a key factor for success and outstanding attitude. Therefore, whereas it’s important to “stand by your man” (do I really have to add “or woman” so not to be misunderstood?), you should not do so when it involves dumbing down your standards. If you compromise values, you become a lesser person - and this applies equally to a family as to an individual. If you want the best, be the best. Otherwise, you lose and reduce your worth. The potential for respect is lowered or blocked.

It’s good to talk. Again, don’t dumb down or skirt around an “awkward” subject. If you’re happy to play with each other’s intimate bits, there should be no “no-go” areas out of bed. Sometimes, there’s the need for tough talking and challenging your partner’s limitations. Always be constructive. Be willing to admit you’ve been wrong, appreciating that error-focused learning should be applauded. Sort things out, using logical understanding. Find the best way forward - onwards and upwards - for all.

At some point, you might come close to disaster. There can be lapses or a breakdown in communication. If or when this happens, massively up your game. Be at your absolute best. Listen, learn, do more, repair, build better. If it’s a healthy relationship, proven to be so or with outstanding potential, never give up. Grasp every opportunity and work harder.

Don’t be lazy or fearful. Think more. Break out of your chains; think outside the box. Realise that “normal” is overrated. Aim higher. Make better choices. When there’s no challenge, there’s no growth. And if there’s no growth, there’s stagnation. Stagnation in turn leads to complacency, which will dull or suffocate love.

Respect for your partner will keep those important bits down under nice and wet or hard. And by “respect”, I mean a deep respect. This involves a high level of worthiness and admiration. It requires honour, outstanding effort, and achievement. It’s the opposite of mediocre. There has to be an integrity of purpose. You should be worthy of love, rather than automatically expecting it.

Relationship counsellors recognise the importance of respect. But they largely miss the point, bleating on about politeness and courtesy, probably repeating the modern superficial mantra of “be kind”. This isn’t really respect, other than a hollow version. They waffle on because they lack depth themselves - not knowing, nor having reached, anything better. They’re part of the “normal” trap.

Be bigger. Get off yourself. Love songs can sound great, with some of the best music - but, as they're "popular", they often just encourage you to feel sorry for yourself. Most people, of course, relate to the sentiments being expressed. But, other than offering comfort in numbers, there's rarely a good solution mentioned in the lyrics. Self-pity is indulgent and never helps. Be more. Go beyond. Love demands something higher.

A partner is probably going to be one of the main influences in your life, so choose wisely. Otherwise, he or she will be a limiting factor - someone who will negatively disrupt or stop the development of your human potential. When you're young, especially, it's easy to let a partner dominate and push for what they want, throwing you way off course. Good looks, even a great bum, fade into insignificance when this very real threat is seriously considered.

Don't let a partner get in the way of you living your highest dream. A loving relationship should always be supportive and encouraging, not a hindrance or show-stopper. Alarm bells should ring if there's any underhand attempt at manipulation, let alone emotional ultimatums of "Choose me, or else...". There can be no place for one person's insecurity to dominate.

I'm a romantic and a massive fan of intimate love. I've done my best above to provide concise guidance on how to be more loving and build a better relationship, based on over 45 years of successful adult life experience. But I have one more crucial point to add: deeper meaning and purpose is even more important than the intimacy of a personal relationship. Who we are, who we can become, determines our worthiness for love - as well as our capacity for being loving. The scope is massive. And long overdue. No woman enjoys a goldfish in the bowl - so why be a pygmy when you can be a giant? Maturity is sexy. It's time to grow up and be much, much more. Think big. The best sex organ of all? You've got it: it's the brain. Don't be a dull idiot. Be an amazing lover and partner. Consider learning to love everyone and everything, although that's another topic, going beyond the scope of this particular essay.

Iain Scott, December 2020

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