

Odds of longevity for summer romances

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Summer romance can sometimes fade with coming of autumn. UC Irvine researchers are studying how humans process messages of love and how feelings change over time. Credit: Jocelyn Lee/UC Irvine

Sun, sand, surf and a smile across a crowded beach might spark a summer romance, but once the season passes, will the glow endure?

Researchers are systematically investigating the how, what and why of how people feel love. It's challenging, said Joachim Vandekerckhove, assistant professor of cognitive sciences at UCI, because cues that trigger the emotion can elicit different responses in different people. What makes one person feel loved at one point may not have the same effect down the road, and another may feel it differently.

"Receiving a smile, spending time with friends, encountering someone who seems happy to see you – seemingly simple acts can trigger a very powerful emotion that is key in our happiness," Vandekerckhove said.

But the degree of subjectivity makes the topic hard to probe – and it's exactly what piqued the interest of a team of researchers from UCI and The Pennsylvania State University. They received \$540,000 from the John Templeton Foundation to explore what makes people happy over the long haul, using felt love as one of their primary measures.

"The way we look at love is as a mode of communication, with a sender, a medium and a receiver," said Vandekerckhove, who is co-leading the study. "While quite some research exists on expressions of love, we are primarily interested in the receiver's ability to detect, understand and know that they are loved."

"We enjoy the challenge of trying to measure such an intangible subject," said Zita Oravecz, assistant professor of [human development](#) & family studies at Penn State, who is co-leading the project. Rounding out the research team are William Batchelder, professor of cognitive sciences at UCI, and Sarah Pressman, associate professor of psychology & social behavior at UCI.

To understand how people feel love, they are developing tailored ecological momentary assessment tools – think super-quick, one- to two-minute surveys on smartphones and tablets – that ping participants

throughout the day to record their emotions.

"This allows us to quickly capture participants' feelings at different points over an extended period of time, as opposed to traditional measures that ask how someone is feeling at one point," Oravec said. The longitudinal approach will let researchers collect data that's less sensitive to transient moods and focus on patterns over time.

The responses will be run through multidimensional mathematical models of temporal dynamics in an attempt to determine what makes people flourish and how love factors in.

Previous research has shown that the impact of love is reduced if the target is unreceptive due to individual differences that alter the perception/interpretation of the message – he or she is not feeling the love that someone else may be communicating.

"For example, people who have low self-esteem or are dysphoric might be cognitively unreceptive and not perceive or interpret messages of love the same as others – not due to unwillingness in the cognitive processing but to a potentially resolvable inability," Vandekerckhove said.

The result? Their well-being isn't what it could be.

The UCI-Penn State team's goal is to better understand changes in well-being over time, what factors make up felt love, and how future research might be directed at positive psychological interventions – strategies that could help more people feel the [love](#) and be happy.

Provided by University of California

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