

What is love?

July 14 2020, by Gery Karantzas



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

From songs and poems to novels and movies, romantic love is one of the most enduring subjects for artworks through the ages. But what about the science?

Historical, cultural and even evolutionary evidence suggests love existed during ancient times and across many parts of the world. Romantic love has been found to exist in [147 of 166 cultures](#) looked at in one study.

The complexity of love has much to do with how people experience it differently and how it can change over time.

Like, love, or 'in love'?

Psychological [research](#) over the past 50 years has investigated the differences between liking someone, loving someone and being "in love".

Liking is described as having positive thoughts and feelings towards someone and finding that person's company rewarding. We often also experience warmth and closeness towards the people we like. In some instances we choose to be emotionally intimate with these people.

When we [love someone](#) we experience the same positive thoughts and experiences as when we like a person. But we also experience a deep sense of care and commitment towards that person.

Being "[in love](#)" includes all the above but also involves feelings of sexual arousal and attraction. However, research into people's own views of love suggests that not all love is the same.

Passionate vs companionate love

Romantic love consists of two types: passionate and companionate love. Most romantic relationships, whether they be [heterosexual or same sex](#), involve both these parts.

[Passionate love](#) is what people typically consider being "in love". It includes feelings of passion and an intense longing for someone, to the point they might obsessively think about wanting to be in their arms.

The second part is known as [companionate love](#). It's not felt as intensely, but it's complex and connects feelings of emotional intimacy and commitment with a deep attachment toward the [romantic partner](#).

How does love change over time?

[Research](#) looking at changes in romantic love over time typically finds that although passionate love starts high, it declines over the course of a relationship.

There are various reasons for this.

As partners learn more about each other and become more confident in the long-term future of the relationship, routines develop. The opportunities to experience novelty and excitement can also decline, as can the frequency of [sexual activity](#). This can cause passionate love to subside.

Although a reduction in passionate love is not experienced by all couples, various studies report approximately 20-40% of couples experience this downturn. Of couples who have been married in excess of ten years, the steepest downturn is most likely to occur over the [second decade](#).

Life events and transitions can also make it challenging to experience passion. People have competing responsibilities which affect their energy and [limit the opportunities](#) to foster passion. Parenthood is an example of this.

In contrast, [companionate love](#) is typically found to increase over time.

Although research finds most romantic relationships consist of both passionate and companionate love, it's the absence or reductions in

companionate love, moreso than passionate love, that can negatively affect the longevity of a romantic relationship.

But what's the point of love?

Love is an emotion that keeps people bonded and committed to one another. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, love evolved to keep the parents of children together long enough for them to survive and reach [sexual maturity](#).

The period of childhood is much longer for humans than other species. As offspring rely on adults for many years to survive and to develop the skills and abilities needed for successful living, love is especially important for humans.

Without love, it's difficult to see how the human species could have [evolved](#).

A biological foundation too

Not only is there an evolutionary foundation to love, love is rooted in biology. [Neurophysiological studies](#) into [romantic love](#) show that people who are in the throes of [passionate love](#) experience increased activation in [brain regions](#) associated with reward and pleasure.

In fact, the [brain regions](#) activated are the same as those activated by cocaine.

These regions release chemicals such as oxytocin, vasopressin and dopamine, which produce feelings of happiness and euphoria that are also linked to sexual arousal and excitement.

Interestingly, these [brain regions](#) are not activated when thinking about non-romantic relationships such as friends. These findings tell us that liking someone is not the same as being in love with someone.

What's your love style?

[Research](#) has found three primary styles of love. First coined by psychologist [John Lee](#), the love styles are eros, ludus and storge. These styles include people's beliefs and attitudes about love and act as a guide for how to approach [romantic relationships](#).

Eros

This style of love refers to erotic love and is focused on physical attraction and engaging in sex, the quick development of strong and passionate feelings for another and intense intimacy.

Ludus

This style involves being emotionally distant and often involves "game-playing". It's not surprising people who endorse this love style are unlikely to commit, feel comfortable ending relationships and often start a new relationship before ending the current one.

Storge

Storge is often regarded as a more mature form of love. Priority is given to having a relationship with a person who has similar interests, affection is openly expressed and there is less emphasis on physical attractiveness. People high on storge love are trusting of others and are not needy or dependent on others.

Or is a mixture more your style?

You may see yourself in more than one of these styles.

[Evidence](#) suggests some people possess a mixture of the three main love styles; these mixtures were labelled by Lee as mania, pragma and agape.

Manic love includes intense feelings for a partner as well as worry about committing to the relationship. Pragmatic love involves making sensible relationship choices in finding a partner who will make a good companion and friend. Agape is a self-sacrificing love that is driven by a sense of duty and selflessness.

Why do you love the way you do?

A person's love style has little to do with their [genetics](#). Rather, it's associated with the development of personality and a person's past relationship experiences.

Some [studies](#) have found people who are high on dark traits, such as narcissism, psychopathy and machiavellianism, endorse more of a ludus or pragma love style.

People who have an [insecure attachment style](#), involving a high need for validation and preoccupation with relationship partners, endorse more mania love, while those who are uncomfortable with intimacy and closeness do not endorse eros love.

No matter the differences in the way love is experienced, one thing remains common for all: we as humans are social animals who have a deep fascination for it.

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