

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Love Triangles \*

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With Valentine's Day approaching, it seems appropriate to discuss love. However, there are many types of love. In 1988, psychologist Robert Sternberg developed a theory which involves different types of love, depending on whether they have one or more of three components – intimacy, passion or commitment.

- **Intimacy** involves a feeling of closeness developed by people who mutually risk by sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings. This causes a strong feeling of *trust*.
- **Passion** involves the emotional arousal that leads to romance, physical attraction and sexual interaction.
- **Commitment** occurs when a person (at first) makes a decision to love and (later) decides to maintain the relationship that has developed.

These three components can be diagrammed in a triangular shape, with each factor indicated by the length of a side of the triangle. In some types of love only one component is evident. In that case, the other two sides are represented by dashes rather than a solid line. The size of the triangle indicates the intensity of the relationship – with a larger triangle indicating more intensity. The relative length of each side indicates the importance of each component. The varied combinations of these three factors lead to seven different kinds of love. During the span of any relationship, these types of love can change for both partners.

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### Intimacy, passion and commitment can combine and re-combine to give us variations of seven different types of love.

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**Liking** – as found in some friendships – involves only intimacy, with little or no commitment or passion. **Empty love** – involving only commitment – is typical of estranged partners, who remain together for "*the kids' sake*" or social appearance. **Fatuous (deceptive) love** – combining aspects of passion and commitment – involves little or no intimacy. The partners do not really know each other.

In Sternberg's theory, **passionate love** involves intimacy and passion with very little – if any – commitment. Passionate love involves intense and sometimes confused emotions. Depending on the status of the relationship, the emotions may repeatedly swing from elation and joy to emotional pain, anxiety to relief, altruism to jealousy or tenderness to sexual passions. The loved person is *the* focus of your life. You are obsessed by thoughts of that person. It is hard to think about anyone – or anything – other than the loved person. The loved one is idealized – you are not aware of any faults that person might have. It is a "*peak experience*" making you feel much more "*alive*" than under normal conditions.

Some people view passionate love as identical to infatuation. However, in Sternberg's theory, **infatuation** involves only passion – but there is no intimacy. The exclusive preoccupation and intense feelings of passionate love are present. The loved person seems to fit the image of the perfect fantasy mate that we have developed. (Here and with passionate love, "*love is blind.*")

Infatuation can develop – even if you never communicate with the other person. Once contact is made, feelings can range from boundless joy (if there is any sign of mutual feeling) to the depths of depression (if the feeling is rejected or not reciprocated). However, many find it hard to distinguish between passionate

love and infatuation. They often call it "love" while the relationship is ongoing, but they label it "infatuation" if the relationship has ended.

In the unstable relationship of passionate love, partners tend to fear potential rejection. This type of love is most likely to lead to **jealousy** – a response to a perceived threat to a relationship, which may or may not be real. Usually jealousy is caused by insecurity and low self-esteem on the part of the jealous partner.

In contrast to passionate love, **companionate love** – involving intimacy and commitment with minimal passion – is much less intense emotionally. The partner is usually only *one* point of focus in your life. In contrast of the potential "love at first sight" of passionate love, companionate love usually develops over a longer time, possibly starting just with liking. With this longer time span and the lack of exclusivity, there is more emotional trust. The relationship is stronger and more stable. Companionate love involves friendly affection and deep attachment. There is typically more reciprocal liking and respect. Jealousy is unlikely to develop.



The balanced version of love – with almost equal amounts of passion, intimacy and commitment – is called **consummate love** or **conjugal love**. This seems to be the type of love that most of us are seeking. However, even in the best relationship, the levels of these factors will vary as the relationship progresses. With aging, the passion component will tend to wane. I hope you can find – and keep – the love relationship you desire.

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\* Adapted from Curtis Byer and Louis Shainberg's *Dimensions of Human Sexuality*, Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1991, pages 72-76.