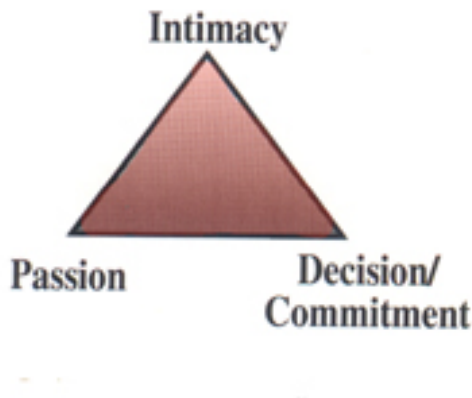


A LINE ON LIFE

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The Many Faces of Love *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.



In this holiday season, there is much talk about "brotherly love" – a feeling of caring for other human beings. However, love means different things to different people. In 1986, psychologist Robert Sternberg developed a **triangular theory of love**. The three components of love – intimacy, passion and decision/commitment – form the points of his triangle. The combining of the three components gives different kinds of love.

Intimacy is the warm, close, bonding feeling of loving someone. It consists of –

- Communicating with your partner about intimate things.
- Understanding each other.
- Valuing and being happy with their presence in your life.
- Giving and receiving emotional support.
- Holding them in high regard and promoting their welfare.
- Being there for each other in time of need.
- Sharing yourself and your possessions.

Passion involves the emotional arousal that can lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual interaction. It may relate to desires to gain self-esteem, be sexually active, to affiliate with others, to dominate or to subordinate.

Decision/commitment has both a short-term and a long-term component. The short-term aspect is deciding to love someone. Once the decision has been made, you can make a long-term commitment to maintain that love. However, the short-term decision does not always lead to the long-term commitment.

These components can combine in eight basic ways. Some of these are so extreme, we may have never experienced them. However, these kinds of love may change over the span of any relationship.

Nonlove is the absence of any of these components. Although some relations may form solely for financial reasons or fear, they rarely last unless some of the components develop.

Empty love involves only the decision/commitment component. Some couples remain in a relationship only "for the children's sake" or to "keep up appearances."

Liking involves only intimacy, not passion or commitment. It can be a friendship that develops in a particular, but temporary, situation. These friends come and go as situations change.

Infatuation – passion only – is like "*love at first sight*." This is also the love that fans have for their idols in sports or entertainment. There is sudden passion. Whether sexual or not, it involves a high level of physical and emotional arousal – becoming obsessive and all-consuming. It is hard to think about anyone (or anything) else other than the loved person. The loved one is idealized – you are not aware of that person's faults. It is a "*peak experience*," making you feel much more "*alive*" than under normal conditions. The passion is rarely returned. When the idol is found to have human faults, the fan may experience great distress.

If contact is made, feelings can range from boundless joy (with any sign of a mutual feeling) to the depths of depression (if the feeling is not returned). However, it is hard to distinguish between infatuation and romantic love. It is called romantic love when the relationship is ongoing. When the relationship ends, it is labeled infatuation.

Romantic love – intimacy and passion – can develop from either component. The previous paragraph shows its development from passion. It is also similar to liking, but it is more intense. It is more confusing than either. 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, tenderness to sexual passions.

A "*summer romance*" fits well here. Without commitment, partners fear potential rejection. This is likely to lead to jealousy – a response to any perceived threat to a relationship. However, jealousy is usually caused by the insecurity and low self-esteem of the jealous partner.

Fatuous love – only passion and commitment – is usually a whirlwind love. The couple fall "*in love at first sight*," quickly marrying. It goes so fast, they hardly know what happened. According to Sternberg, "*It is fatuous in the sense that commitment is made on the basis of passion without the stable element of intimate involvement — which takes time to develop.*" Without intimacy, when passion fades, commitment is not enough to maintain the relationship.

Companionate love – intimacy and commitment without passion – seems closest to the common picture of "*brotherly love*." Usually this type of love develops over a longer span of time. You need to get to know each other. This can be the strong bond of a committed friendship.

**Consummate love may be ideal,
but as long as your triangles match,
you can maintain a gratifying relationship.**

Consummate love – the combination of all three elements – seems to be what most of us dream about in our love relationships. Few of us achieve it. If we do, it takes much effort to sustain it over time. For example, as couples grow older, passionate aspects may fade, leaving them with companionate love. The "*roaring flames*" of passion decline, leaving the comfortable warmth of "*glowing embers*." As time passes, our relationships change. Sternberg believes relationships can be successful, if the triangles of partners match well. In this holiday season, I hope your triangles match those of people you "*love*."

* Adapted from Bryan Strong, Christine DeVault and Barbara Werner Sayad's *Human Sexuality: Diversity in Contemporary America*, Mayfield Publishing, 1999, pages 209-213.