

A LINE ON LIFE

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Starting Relationships – and Continuing Them *

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With Valentine's Day approaching, people tend to think about developing a love relationship. Especially if you are alone, developing such a relationship may seem like an unsolvable problem. How do you get a relationship started?

The first step – excluding recent computer advances – is **propinquity** – a physical approximation that allows communication. In other words, you will never find "*that certain someone*" by just sitting in your room and moping. You need to interact with other people. If you never contact each other, you cannot even start a relationship. Most relationships start because people live nearby, are in the same class, or go to the same restaurant, church or club. (To this we can now add the "*chat room*.")

Propinquity allows the next factor to develop – **familiarity**. Even without any interaction, mere *repeated exposure* to others – all other things being equal – will tend to make others like you more. In 1982, psychologists had half of their subjects see a picture of the same male college student once a week over four weeks, while the other half of their subjects saw photos of a different man each week. If you haven't guessed already, the repeatedly seen student was rated as more liked than the other four at the end of the four weeks.

I hope you noticed that I qualified my statement by saying "*all other things being equal*." One of the things that may influence this liking – making it either stronger or weaker – is **physical attractiveness**. This is one of the most powerful factors to influence the *beginning* of a relationship. Unfortunately, too many of us worry about deviating from what we believe to be the "*ideal type*." Many of us feel unattractive. This is because we think our muscles, breasts, noses or some other body parts are not the right shape or size.

To remedy these apparent deviations, we engage in diets, exercises and even surgery. Well, I have a very easy exercise that will make you more attractive to others. All you need to do is **smile**. In a 1982 study, psychologists found that smiling makes you generally more attractive to both men and women. Likewise, sad expressions will make you seem less attractive.

The next step is actual **interaction**. The relationship will not develop merely because you are in the same place, even if you are attractive. One way to begin an interaction is to ask a question. For example, if it is not obviously indicated, you could ask if you are in the right place. "*Is this where they are having the meeting on...?*" Once this is settled, you could introduce yourself and ask the person other questions.

Once the conversation has started, you may notice **similarities** in attitudes, ideas, interests and preferences. These similarities not only give you more to discuss; they lead to greater attraction. However, as the other person reveals things to you, you need to also reveal aspects of yourself. First these will be relatively surface aspects. As the relationship develops, more intimate details may be revealed.

Next, for the relationship to develop, there must be **reciprocity**. In other words, not only do you need to be attracted to others, but also others need to be attracted to you. Likewise, they need to have some indication that you like them. This helps the relationship, because people tend to like those who like them.

Loving and liking are similar, but they are not the same.

So far, we have categorized friendships and loving relationships together. However, liking and loving are not identical. In 1970, psychologist Zick Rubin found some differences. Rubin concluded that liking consists more of **respect** – favorably evaluating the person – and **perceived similarity** – viewing others as being like you. In contrast, loving involves more **attachment** – feeling miserable without the physical presence or emotional support of that person – **caring** – a feeling of concern and responsibility, a **predisposition to help** – and **exclusiveness and absorption** – being totally absorbed *only* in that person.

Of course, you can both love and like the same person, whether or not it is a romantic relationship. In his study of 158 dating couples, Rubin found that both men and women loved each other equally. However, the women liked the men slightly more than the men liked the women. This difference seems to be caused by women evaluating men higher in terms of intelligence and leadership potential – the *respect* factor.

Romantic love emphasizes the *absorption* factor in love, when the flames of passion burn hotly and emotions are high. As the flames of passion drop down to a warm glow over the years, the factors of liking become more important. This is more typical of **companionate love**. However, with some couples, when the passion dies down, there is not much liking and they often break up.

Regardless of the type of love, it seems easier to start a relationship than to keep one going. Not only does *similarity* begin attraction; it also affects the long-term survival and satisfaction of any relationship. This is not only similarity in the preferences of sports, music or books. It also involves central issues such as gender roles and the style of communication in the relationship. Agreement about roles seems to be particularly important. Who is earning the money? Who will stay at home to care for the children? Who is responsible for household chores? Who makes the decisions? Regardless of the specific decisions, marital satisfaction is greater when the couples agree on these role decisions.

In 1983, psychologist Bernard Davidson and his associates found that similarity in disclosing feelings was also important in maintaining satisfaction. They found that if both partners are *equally* likely to disclose inner feelings and thoughts – whether they share greatly or just a little – they are more satisfied with their marriages. However, when one partner discloses much more than the other, marital satisfaction seems to drop.

Another factor that is critical for lasting relationships is **positive interactions**. In other words, even with some bad exchanges between the members, they need to be outnumbered by the good ones. In terms of reward and punishment, more of the interactions need to be rewarding rather than punishing. If negative interactions outnumber positive ones, this would gradually lead to avoidance of the partner and a breakup of the relationship. Even so, psychologists have found that the couple's **perception** of the interaction is more important than the actual interaction. For example, some couples may argue constantly. If they don't perceive this arguing as negative – regardless of whether others do or not – it will not be detrimental to their relationship.

Sociologists tend to agree with these findings. In 1982, sociologists Lewis and Spanier concluded that "*rewards from spousal interaction*" is one of the three key ingredients for enduring marriages. The other two are "*satisfaction with their life-style*" and having "*sufficient resources*" (social and personal). The rewards from spousal interaction included:

1. positive regard for the spouse,
2. emotional gratification,
3. effective communication,

4. roles that fit with each other,
5. a sufficient amount of interaction.

When these elements are positive, the relationships tend to be more satisfying and lasting. Communication is not only verbal – involving words. Partners in happy relationships tend to have effective **nonverbal communication**. We know that satisfaction and good signal-reading go together. To add to this, training couples to communicate – to listen better and notice each other's body language – has been shown to increase marital satisfaction.

In 1981, a clever study by psychologists Gottman and Porterfield indicated the importance of signal-reading clearly. Couples were asked to communicate one of several meanings for ambiguous sentences. As an example, for the sentence, "*I'm cold, aren't you?*" one partner had to convey one of these three possible meanings:

"Please warm me up with some physical affection."

"Please turn up the heat."

"Are you cold too?"

The messages were videotaped. The partner and the others couples had to decide from the tape which message was being sent.

With unhappy couples, the wives read their husbands fairly well, but the husbands were *not* reading the wives. Strangers – the other couples – could read the wife quite well, so it wasn't that she was sending poorly. The husband was just not seeing – or was misreading – the body language and voice inflections of his wife!

In contrast, with happy couples, both husband and wife could read each other's intended meanings better than strangers could. This suggests that happily married couples might develop some sort of private nonverbal language.

There is much we do not know about the "*glue*" that holds couples together. However, the qualities that have been mentioned here may be helpful to you for Valentine's Day and beyond.

* Adapted from Houston, Bee & Rimm's *Essentials of Psychology*, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1985, pages 478-480.