



The biology of love vs. the modern-day romance

There is nothing quite like the power of new love – butterflies in the stomach, giddiness, euphoria and high levels of chemistry. Everything feels so exciting. You spend extra time grooming. You play hooky from work or you have trouble working because you can't stop thinking about the object of your affection.

This *stage* of love is often called *passionate love, being in love, romantic love or infatuation*. I emphasize the word *stage* because it is only one stage of the dance we call romantic relationships and, unfortunately, it's not a permanent thing.

Does that mean that once you move out of the infatuation stage that you are destined to a passionless marriage? Of course not. But the passion may be different and it will likely take more effort to conjure up than it did in the beginning. It's important to understand the biology of love which, I believe, interplays with the cognitive "thinking" pieces or choices of a modern-day relationship.

Infatuation is also called the *Attraction system*. When we are attracted to someone we think has potential as a mate, levels of two brain chemicals go up - dopamine and norepinephrine, and a third chemical decreases – serotonin. This is what causes all of the symptoms of infatuation I listed earlier. Your brain sets you up to be hyper-focused on what you like about this one person and to discount or ignore the parts you don't like, in order to facilitate the "getting together" part of the mating process. The infatuation state can last 18-24 months. You may still be in the infatuation stage up until the time you get married, depending on how long you have been together.

It is very common for couples to then "hit a wall" once the honeymoon is over and the reality of day-to-day life kicks in, or after some period of time of being together. This is usually part-biology and part-behavioral. From an evolutionary standpoint, we would be ineffective in our abilities to work, raise kids, etc., if we were euphoric, giddy and distracted all of the time, so it makes sense that nature would limit this stage. From a behavioral perspective, we often stop doing all of the things we did in the "getting together" phase (e.g., making extra time for each other, grooming ourselves extra specially, etc.) which made us attractive to our partner. In addition, we now have to deal with the "collision" between our fantasy picture of our marriage and partner versus the reality of it (also known as the *disillusionment stage*) and come to terms with it.

This leads us to the stage of *mature love*, which seems to be associated at a biological level with the *Attachment system*. This system is associated with feelings of calmness and security in our relationship, due to two other brain chemicals – oxytocin and vasopressin. Holding, massage and orgasm all cause increases in these chemicals, and subjectively, we feel content and peaceful. Have you ever heard people say that they feel more like friends than lovers? This may be the attachment system at work because when your attachment chemicals go up, this interferes with your attraction/passion chemicals.

But don't dismay! Novelty seems to help increase your attraction/passion chemicals. So take that vacation! Try something new to "spice up your sex life" as they say! Excitement is generated when we have something to look forward to, when we are planning something fun or interesting, like a surprise or a trip. When the excitement or newness of a relationship starts to wear off we may start looking elsewhere, such as our careers, for new stimulation and challenges, rather than realizing we must make an effort to keep that excitement alive. The passion does not need to be absent, but again, have realistic expectations that it will never feel exactly like it did when it was brand new!

I also want you to know that it is perfectly normal to be attracted to someone you do not love or have any attachment to, because the *Lust System* is separate and distinct from the other two systems. It doesn't mean you love your partner any less because you find someone else attractive. It just means that you will have to make choices every day about who you want to be with. I also want to warn you that there are people who are "in love with being in love." These individuals seem to be unable to move forward into the mature stage of love because they crave that passion and euphoria of the infatuation stage.

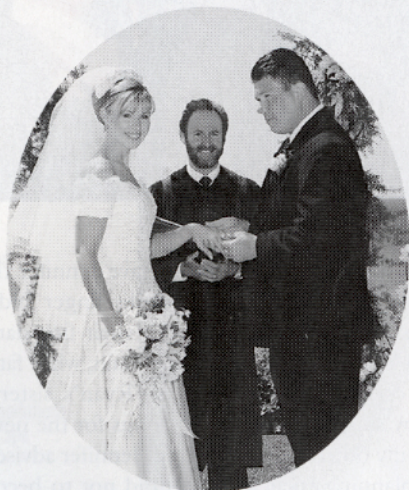
Helen Fisher, Ph.D., an anthropologist, suggests that we are probably biologically wired to be serial monogamists and to part company after about four years. From an evolutionary standpoint, this is around the time that children are more independent and can be cared for by other "members of the tribe" and not just mom, so the need for a mate for our survival decreases. Studies of 62 societies found that divorce was most prevalent around the fourth year of marriage, when people were in their early 20's or when there was one or no children. The older you get, the more children and the longer the relationship, the less likely you are to divorce.

So what are the implications for a modern-day marriage? The bottom line is that the choice to partner up for life does not necessarily fit with our biological drives – it is a choice we make. So go into this choice with your eyes wide open. Have realistic expectations about passion and romance in your relationship and don't misinterpret a lack of chemistry as "falling out of love." Make choices everyday to keep your bond strong and keep the passion alive. Feeling safe and calm has its benefits too, so embrace the pluses and minuses of each stage of your love relationship and grow together into a mature love!

DEBORAH ANDERSON, PhD

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