

Boyfriends, Girlfriends, Lovers, Partners

Our closest relationships have the capacity to enrich our lives, to nurture us and bring us great happiness and contentment. They can also bring sadness, distress, preoccupation and unsettlement. Which of these emotional states you are experiencing will be influenced by things like the stage your relationship is in, your expectations, and your way of loving and fighting.

So Is This Love?

There are many types of love. There is *romantic love* or *passionate love* that most relationships begin with. It is an intense and exciting time, where the heart beats faster, and everything about them is perfect. All your time seems to be spent thinking about or being with each other. This kind of love has wonderful highs, but it also has lows that are painful and can be almost described as physical pain. This kind of love can either die out or move into what has been called *companionate love* or *mature love* which is thought to be the kind with real staying power.

Mature love is a blending of friendship, physical attraction, sexual desire, companionship and commitment. This type of love is the type to last but still needs work to make it grow and get better. The couple are friends and lovers. Both partners really care about each other's well being as well as their own, and are more realistic in their view of one another and accepting of differences between them. They have created balance between the intimacy of being a couple and being separate individuals within the relationship.

Closeness and Distance

An experience of closeness, connectedness or intimacy is what most people seek in a relationship. But relationships can't maintain a constant level of intimacy; they also require distance to allow each individual to develop. Finding a balance between closeness and time together, and distance from each other and the relationship can be a significant challenge for couples. Consider the following questions:

Are you expecting the relationship to sustain all your needs?

Are you able to have part of your life separate from your partner?

Do you resent or feel left out if your partner finds satisfaction on their own?

Are your individual activities leading to a lack of time together?

How much closeness or distance each person looks for may depend on expectations, realistic or otherwise, that individuals bring to the relationship.

Styles of Loving

People show love to their partner and experience being loved in different ways. Many individuals find their partners' style is different from their own. Which is your style?

Communication: a feeling of closeness or intimacy which comes from being able to talk about everything from what the day was like to study problems to the direction the relationship is taking.

Physical Affection and Sex: For most couples, touch and physical affection is an important way of being intimate. Non-sexual touch of cuddles, caresses, kisses on the cheek is just as important as sexual affection and making love.

Togetherness: For some, sharing time and being with each other is the preferred way of being close with their partner. It may be through a shared activity like bushwalking, home maintenance or research, but even being in the same room whilst doing different things can bring a sense of closeness.

Doing: Are you someone who shows you care by doing things for your partner; fixing the internet access, preparing dinner, making the morning coffee or attending the not so interesting party or event because they want to?

The style you most prefer will often be the one you hear yourself asking for more of from your partner.

Styles of Conflict

Conflict has the potential to help the relationship and the individuals grow OR to destroy the relationship and place strain on the individuals.

Examples of good or constructive conflict are disagreements that feel respectful and fair for both parties; have room for both parties to speak their mind and feel listened to; and where there is a growth in mutual understanding.

Examples of destructive conflict are where there is 'kitchen sink' fighting; issues remain unresolved and lead to resentment; where criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, railroading or contempt become regular patterns.

Being genuinely curious about your partner's beliefs is a great relationship enhancer.

Relationship Abuse

Abuse in a relationship can take the form of *physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, or economic* abuse and typically includes *threats, intimidation, intense criticism, forced isolation and/or physical violence*. The overwhelming proportion of victims of relationship violence are women, but violence has been known to be perpetrated against men as well. Relationship abuse and violence occurs among all races, ages, classes, religious groups, and within heterosexual, and gay and lesbian relationships. It can affect a person's health and self confidence.

Myths and Expectations

Unrealistic expectations, not your partner can be responsible for dissatisfaction in couple relationships. These can include:

- I shouldn't have to work for love
- My partner should be emotionally available to me whenever I need him or her.
- A good relationship is free from conflict.
- If I am not happy in a relationship, it's my partner's fault.
- If my partner loves me, they will instinctively know what I need to be happy.
- My relationship can meet all my needs.
- A good relationship means spending all our spare time with each other.

If you discover you're expecting too much from love, but want your relationship to last, you can modify your expectations or adopt new ones to better suit your relationship.

For further information see www.relationships.com.au or make an appointment with one of the counsellors at ANU Counselling - phone (02)61780455