

The Love We Expect, the Love We Can Receive

How Earlier Relationships Shape What We Seek, Fear, and Recognize as Love

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A partner offers reassurance, but something in us remains unconvinced. They say they love us, yet their distraction at dinner seems more believable than their words. Or they are consistently available, and we find ourselves feeling strangely restless. We wanted someone dependable. Why does dependability sometimes leave us uncertain about whether we are in love?

We may also experience the opposite. Someone is difficult to reach, unpredictable, or reluctant to commit, and our attention becomes increasingly organized around them. A warm exchange brings relief; distance brings renewed longing. We begin wondering how to become the person they will finally choose.

These experiences do not have one explanation. Attraction, compatibility, current behavior, personal history, and the circumstances of our lives all matter. But they invite a useful question: What have we learned to expect from love, and how do those expectations affect the love we can recognize and receive?

The Relationship We Carry Into Relationships

Attachment theory describes internal working models: expectations about ourselves, other people, and what happens when we need connection. These expectations develop through relationships. They concern whether others are likely to respond, whether our needs are welcome, and whether we can remain connected while expressing distress or difference.

Bowlby's secure-base perspective treats dependable care as supporting both contact and exploration (1988). Adulthood does not make wanting someone disappear. We may seek comfort, face uncertainty, and venture into life with another person's support, while still needing dignity and room for our own judgment.

A child whose fear is met with patience may gradually learn that needing someone does not make them a burden. A child whose sadness brings irritation may learn to hide it. Someone who receives attention mainly through accomplishment may come to expect that love must be earned. Someone whose caregivers are unpredictable may become highly attentive to small changes in availability.

These expectations are not simply beliefs we can list. They may appear in how quickly we apologize, how difficult it is to ask for comfort, or how our body responds when a partner turns away. We might consciously believe that we deserve care while feeling uncomfortable when it arrives.

Allan Schore's developmental synthesis treats attachment as centrally concerned with affect regulation (2000). In everyday relationships, this invites attention to expression, tone, timing and responsiveness

alongside words. These exchanges can feel welcome or unsettling. They cannot by themselves identify a neural process, verify an earlier history or tell us what a partner intends.

Earlier relationships influence these expectations without determining them permanently. Later friendships, partnerships, therapy, and other meaningful experiences can revise what we anticipate. Our working model is an evolving way of understanding relationships, not a fixed identity or a complete account of who we are.

What We Learn Love Requires

Some people learn that closeness requires being easy to live with. Others learn that they must be impressive, useful, undemanding, sexually available, or emotionally strong. They may become skilled at anticipating what another person wants while having difficulty recognizing what they themselves need.

The expectations can become so familiar that they seem like ordinary facts about love. *If I say what I really think, I will hurt them. If I need too much, they will leave. If I stop giving, there will be little reason to keep me close.* Such assumptions can shape a relationship even when neither person has explicitly agreed to them.

Sometimes the present relationship reinforces the expectation. A partner may genuinely withdraw when challenged or offer affection mainly when their wishes are met. At other times, the expectation persists despite a partner's efforts to respond differently. Understanding the pattern requires examining both what we bring and what is happening now.

The purpose of looking backward is to become more accurate in the present. We need to know whether we are anticipating a familiar injury, responding to an actual limitation, or experiencing both.

When Familiarity Feels Like Attraction

A familiar relationship pattern can feel compelling. We may recognize the role of pursuing someone who remains just beyond reach, earning affection through usefulness, or keeping the peace by setting our own experience aside. The familiarity may help explain why a relationship feels immediately understandable, even when it becomes painful.

But attraction is not proof of an attachment wound, and an intense relationship is not necessarily a repetition of childhood. Desire has many sources, including pleasure, admiration, novelty, shared values, and genuine compatibility. There is no reliable rule that tells us an unavailable partner was chosen because they resemble a parent.

A more useful inquiry concerns what happens as the relationship develops. Are we increasingly able to be ourselves? Can we express needs and difference? Does closeness depend on a repeated pursuit that never becomes mutual? Are we drawn toward the person, or increasingly occupied with obtaining something they rarely offer?

We may be seeking love while also trying to resolve an old question about ourselves: *Can I become important enough to be chosen?* If that possibility fits, it deserves curiosity rather than certainty. Recognizing the question can help us see how much of our life has become organized around waiting for an answer.

When Steadiness Feels Unfamiliar

For someone accustomed to unpredictable connection, steadiness can take time to recognize. There may be less urgency, fewer dramatic reunions, and less relief after fearing the relationship is lost. The absence of those experiences can initially feel unfamiliar or emotionally quiet.

That does not mean every quiet relationship is healthy or that a lack of attraction should be interpreted as resistance to secure love. A dependable partner may still be emotionally unavailable, incompatible, or someone we do not desire. Safety and attraction are important dimensions of a relationship, and neither guarantees the other.

The question is whether we can become curious about what the quiet means. Do we feel more able to rest, speak, play, and express affection? Or do we feel disengaged and unknown? Are we missing the person, or missing the intensity of trying to secure them?

We do not need to force ourselves to love someone because they are kind. We may need enough time and honesty to distinguish unfamiliar ease from a relationship that does not fit.

The Care Offered and the Care Received

Imagine a partner says, “You seem overwhelmed. I can take care of dinner tonight.” The other responds, “It’s fine. I’ll do it,” while feeling disappointed that no one takes care of them.

The offer may be sincere, yet receiving it awakens discomfort. Perhaps accepting help feels like becoming indebted. Perhaps past offers were followed by criticism. Perhaps the person worries that they will lose control of something important or discover that the help is unreliable.

The offering partner may eventually feel that nothing they do reaches the other. The receiving partner may continue feeling alone. Both experiences deserve attention. An offer does not automatically establish that meaningful care occurred, but difficulty receiving does not automatically establish that care was absent.

We can ask what would make the offer more usable. “I want to accept. I’m worried that I’ll have to make it up to you later.” Or, “It would help if you handled the planning as well, so I don’t have to keep directing it.” These conversations make visible the conditions under which care can actually reach someone.

When Love Feels Like a Debt

Care can become difficult to receive when it seems to create an obligation. A gift may bring an immediate need to reciprocate. Comfort may awaken the fear that we will later be expected to tolerate something unwanted. Depending on someone may feel like giving them authority over us.

These concerns sometimes reflect earlier learning, but they may also identify a real feature of the current relationship. Some people do keep accounts. Generosity can be used to secure compliance, and affection can become conditional on agreement. We should not encourage someone to become more receptive without considering whether the care being offered respects their freedom.

In a reciprocal relationship, receiving does create a connection between people. We are affected by what others give, and we may wish to respond with gratitude and generosity. Yet gratitude need not require surrendering our preferences, boundaries, or judgment.

A partner's kindness can matter deeply without purchasing access to our body, our agreement, or our unlimited availability. Trust grows when both people can offer and receive care without turning it into a claim over the other.

The Meanings We Give Small Moments

Working models often become visible in ordinary exchanges. A delayed reply can mean "They are busy," "I do not matter," or "I am about to be left." A partner's wish for time alone can register as a reasonable need or an alarming retreat. A suggestion may feel helpful to one person and like evidence of inadequacy to another.

The meaning can arrive quickly, before we have examined it. We may feel a pit in the stomach, a tightening in the chest, or an urge to demand reassurance. The feeling is real. The explanation we attach to it remains something to investigate.

A useful question is: What happened, and what did I conclude it meant? "They looked at their phone while I was speaking" describes an event. "They do not care about anything I say" is a broader interpretation. The interpretation may reflect a repeated pattern, but it cannot be settled by the feeling alone.

We can take our experience seriously while allowing more than one explanation. This creates room to ask for attention, describe impact, and examine what the partner actually does next.

When Each Person Confirms the Other's Fear

One partner expects that needs will be dismissed and therefore expresses them with urgency. The other expects that they will be found inadequate and begins defending themselves. The first feels more alone and intensifies the request; the second feels increasingly accused and withdraws.

Each response can seem to confirm what the other already fears. *I have to push because you never respond. I have to protect myself because nothing I do is enough.* The relationship begins producing evidence for both expectations.

Understanding this cycle can create room for change, but it does not establish equal responsibility. One person may be repeatedly dismissive, intimidating, or unwilling to participate. Some requests are reasonable responses to sustained neglect. A circular description must still account for behavior, power, and harm.

Where both people can participate safely, change involves more than understanding origins. One may need to ask more directly and make room for an answer. The other may need to become more responsive, remain present, or follow through. New expectations become credible through new experiences.

Love Within Families, Culture, and Power

Our expectations of love are shaped by more than our earliest caregivers. Families, communities, religion, media, and gender roles teach us who should give, who should pursue, what makes someone desirable, and which needs are acceptable.

Someone may be taught that a good partner is endlessly accommodating. Another may learn that dependence is weakness or that competence matters more than tenderness. Cultural expectations can support loyalty and care while also making disagreement, sexual refusal, or personal ambition difficult to express.

These expectations operate within material realities. Financial dependence, discrimination, disability, caregiving demands, and unequal power affect what choices are available. A person may understand their pattern clearly and still face practical barriers to changing it.

Examining a working model of love therefore includes asking whose expectations we have inherited and what they require of us. Which values do we want to keep? Which arrangements are unfair? What support would make a different way of relating possible?

Knudson-Martin's work on power asks us to examine shared relational responsibility and influence rather than assume equality (2013). Benjamin's recognition theory gives a related clinical lens: each person needs to remain someone whose experience can affect the encounter (2018). Bowen's differentiation perspective also retains realistic dependence (Bowen Center, n.d.). Together these questions help distinguish welcome reciprocity from an arrangement in which one person's belonging depends on continual compliance.

What Allows a Working Model to Change

Insight can help us recognize an expectation. Revision usually requires experiences that make another possibility believable. We ask for help and it is offered without humiliation. We disagree and remain connected. A partner acknowledges hurt, changes a behavior, and continues doing so after the conversation has ended.

These experiences need not be perfect. Repair can itself become important evidence: a misunderstanding does not always end connection, and conflict does not always require someone to disappear. Over time, consistency may allow us to risk receiving more of what is available.

Receiving deserves its own moment of inquiry. If help actually reaches you, what becomes possible: rest, a preference, warmth, or a grief about how long you have gone without? If it does not, was the form wrong, the practical work left with you, or the person unreliable? Fosha's discussion of receiving affirmation and reflecting on experience offers a clinical lens for these questions (2000). Gendlin's attention to whether

words fit experience adds another (1980). We use these as invitations to check our account, with external observation equally available. Neither asks you to manufacture relief or reinterpret an unmet need as difficulty receiving.

There is work on both sides. We may need to notice an effort we would previously have dismissed, express a need we usually conceal, or tolerate the vulnerability of relying on someone. Our partner may need to become more trustworthy, attentive, or accountable. Receptivity cannot substitute for responsiveness.

Sometimes change also involves recognizing what a relationship cannot offer. A more accurate working model may help us grieve a limitation, seek support elsewhere, renegotiate the relationship, or leave. Growth does not always lead to greater closeness with the same person.

The Love We Can Make Room For

Perhaps the deepest question is not simply whether someone loves us, but what happens between the love they offer and the love we experience. What do we notice? What do we distrust? What do we feel required to become? What would make care more believable?

We may discover that we have been overlooking something genuine. We may discover that we have been calling hope a relationship. We may also find a mixture: real affection, old fears, current disappointments, and capacities that neither person has fully developed.

A working model becomes more useful when it can accommodate this complexity. We can need connection without interpreting every distance as abandonment. We can recognize kindness without denying harm. We can receive care while remaining truthful about what we want and what we cannot accept.

Love becomes more possible when our expectations can be examined, our needs can be spoken, and another person's actual responses can matter. We bring a history into relationships. We also need room for the relationship in front of us to teach us something we do not yet know.

Clinical Foundations and Further Reading

These sources contribute theory, research synthesis, original research, or clinical and experiential perspectives within the access scopes recorded in the development ledger. The examples and practices are BKL educational interpretations; they do not establish treatment efficacy.

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