

When Intensity Feels Like Love

Attraction, Attachment, and Learning What a Relationship Makes Possible

Brian Kennedy, MA, LMFT

The beginning of a relationship can make ordinary life feel unusually alive. You anticipate the next conversation, notice the phone, and imagine possibilities you had stopped expecting. Attraction can bring pleasure, curiosity, erotic energy, and the feeling of being recognized. None of these needs to be treated with suspicion simply because it is powerful.

Sometimes, though, the anticipation becomes vigilance. You spend more time waiting for connection than enjoying it. A warm message brings enormous relief after days of uncertainty. You become attentive to every change in tone, and the relationship begins to organize the rest of your life. The feeling remains intense, while it becomes harder to know what the intensity is telling you.

The question is what happens between you over time. Can you remain yourself, receive care, speak a difference, and hear another person? Does repair change conduct? Are you becoming more able to participate in life, or using more and more of your attention to preserve brief moments of closeness?

Strong attraction has more than one meaning

Intensity can reflect genuine compatibility, novelty, admiration, sexual desire, uncertainty, or a wish for connection after a lonely period. It may also awaken earlier expectations of being chosen, pursued, controlled, or left. These possibilities can coexist. A strong feeling does not establish which one matters most.

You may feel as though you have known someone forever. That feeling can be moving and still need time to acquire evidence. Have you seen how they handle disappointment? Can you disagree about something important? Do their everyday actions resemble the person you first encountered? Familiarity is a beginning of inquiry, not a guarantee of safety or a proof of reenactment.

Bowlby's attachment framework gives attention to expectations of care and availability [1]. It helps us ask what closeness means to us and what we expect when we need someone. We cannot infer those expectations' exact origins from the chemistry of a new relationship. They may be influenced by earlier bonds, later experience, or present conditions.

Moving more slowly need not diminish desire. It can give desire a fuller person to meet. You may discover playfulness, dependability, and the capacity for repair alongside erotic energy. You may also discover differences that were less visible while being chosen felt like the most important thing.

Familiarity can awaken a familiar version of ourselves

With one person, you become playful and direct. With another, you find yourself waiting, explaining, and working harder to be understood. The attraction may be to the person, and also to the role that becomes available with them. Perhaps you feel particularly useful around someone in distress, or particularly alive when a distant person briefly turns toward you.

Andersen and Chen's relational-self theory offers a framework for how representations of significant others influence present encounters [2]. It invites attention to what a person evokes. It does not show that you unconsciously wanted mistreatment or selected this partner to repair childhood. An interpretation of repetition needs to be checked against the actual history and conduct.

Separate four questions: whom did I choose, what did I expect, how did I participate, and what keeps me investing now? You may have selected someone for genuine shared values but continued accommodating after the relationship changed. Or you may anticipate rejection in a dependable relationship and act before checking. These need different responses.

In *The Love We Expect, the Love We Can Receive*, I explore these expectations more fully. The aim is to become curious about the present without making it merely an echo of the past. Another person deserves to be encountered as a person, and their conduct deserves to be assessed as it happens.

The felt urgency deserves attention, not unquestioned authority

A delayed reply may bring a tight chest, a restless impulse to check, or an urge to send another message. The response can be rapid and difficult to quiet. You may know that several explanations are possible while feeling that only immediate contact will help.

Schore's developmental synthesis relates attachment to affect regulation [3]. Damasio's somatic-marker hypothesis concerns bodily signals and decisions [4]. Their contributions make feeling relevant to judgment. They do not establish a specific brain mechanism behind your attraction or prove that a current reaction is a recovered memory.

Check the immediate situation too. Is the delay ordinary and explained? Has the other person repeatedly disappeared without warning? Is there a broken agreement? Are you tired or isolated from other sources of support? You can attend to your response and ask what the circumstances warrant. Regulation should help you see clearly, rather than teach you to tolerate unreliability indefinitely.

If the response is too intense for useful reflection, start with what helps you remain present: a familiar activity, movement, company, or practical information. You do not need to approach the deepest feeling before making a proportionate decision. A body signal is one source of information among others.

Relief can feel like the depth of the bond

After a period of distance, affection can feel especially powerful. Some of the pleasure may be connection; some may be relief from uncertainty. Recognizing this does not make the tenderness unreal. It helps distinguish a welcome moment from a dependable pattern.

You might notice that the relationship feels most compelling immediately after you feared losing it. Or that you remember reunions more vividly than the days of waiting between them. Ask what those days are doing to your life. Are you sleeping, seeing friends, keeping commitments, and able to think about other things? Is your attention becoming freer or narrower?

No single chemical explains this pattern. It would be misleading to infer an addictive brain circuit from someone's longing, or to make reward theory settle why they stay. Shared history, children, money, housing, grief, desire, and real affection may all contribute. The understanding should become more particular as you learn, not more totalizing.

A trauma bond is a more specific concern

The term trauma bond is most useful when repeated maltreatment, fear, intermittent affection, and a power imbalance help sustain an attachment. Dutton and Painter studied women after abusive relationships, finding associations involving intermittent harm and unequal power [5]. This is a different context from an intense romance or an ordinary conflict.

Look at conduct and freedom. Can you refuse without punishment? Are there threats, degradation, monitoring, sexual pressure, control of resources, or barriers to leaving? Does affection follow harm while responsibility is repeatedly avoided? The distinction concerns the relationship's conditions, not whether the harmed person has a particular psychological label.

You do not need a theory of bonding to take mistreatment seriously. You are not responsible for changing someone who threatens or coerces you. If raising a concern or changing contact could provoke retaliation, a joint exercise may increase risk. Confidential individual support and practical safety planning matter more than testing whether a calm conversation can repair the bond.

The feelings can remain strong even after you recognize the harm. Missing someone is not evidence that returning is safe, and a continuing attachment does not make their conduct your fault. Decisions may require support and time while the longing remains present.

Pursuit and withdrawal can create intensity without coercion

In some relationships where refusal and difference remain safe, one person seeks contact urgently while the other pulls away. The pursuing person feels less important as distance grows; the withdrawing person feels less free as pressure increases. Each protection can make the next response more likely.

Christensen and Heavey's study of demand and withdrawal illustrates that the pattern also depends on the issue and who wants change [6]. It should not be reduced to fixed gender roles or attachment identities.

You may seek discussion on one topic and avoid it on another. Workload, power, and the legitimacy of the unresolved concern also matter.

Understanding the loop does not distribute responsibility equally. Repeatedly demanding reassurance after a refusal needs attention; so does repeatedly postponing an important conversation without returning. Quietness is not proof of regulation, and visible emotion is not proof that someone's concern is unreasonable.

A workable change might be a clearer request, a pause with an agreed return, or practical action on the issue producing distress. The test is whether both people gain room to participate and whether agreements are kept. Soothing a conversation while leaving the underlying problem untouched may simply prepare another round.

Competing protections and the wish to be chosen

One concern may insist that you must preserve the relationship at any cost. Another may want to leave before you can be left. Another may search for faults whenever closeness becomes available. You can recognize these competing movements without assuming that one is the truth and the others are defects.

IFS offers an optional parts language for examining protective concerns [7]. You might ask what the accommodating response fears losing, or what the withdrawing response needs to know before it can remain. If parts language does not fit, use wishes, habits, or feelings. No hidden child or particular memory is required.

Listening does not mean following every strategy. The fear of being alone can receive care while you decline mistreatment. The wish for freedom can be respected while you acknowledge a commitment. The wish to be understood can remain legitimate while you make room for another person's version of the conversation.

In *The Echo Within*, I explore the particular cost of preserving closeness through disappearance. The issue is whether care, difference, and responsibility can coexist, rather than whether either person can become perfectly calm or independent.

A connection can be passionate and still dependable

Healthy love need not feel emotionally flat. Intimacy can be erotic, unsettling, playful, and deeply moving. People can become frightened or defensive and still learn to respond more responsibly. Dependability concerns what happens around those states: whether consent remains intact, concerns can be heard, and repair produces meaningful follow-through.

Bowen's differentiation framework contributes the capacity to maintain a position while staying connected and open to influence [8]. This can make a relationship more alive, not less. You can express desire without making it a demand, hear disappointment without surrendering a limit, and allow the other person to be different without deciding that difference means abandonment.

Fosha and Thoma's clinical writing attends to noticing and reflecting on helpful change [9]. A relevant educational question is what happens when care actually reaches you. Perhaps you immediately explain it away, fear the next withdrawal, or feel sadness about how unfamiliar it is. These responses can be explored without requiring gratitude or turning the encounter into proof of healing.

You may find a quieter pleasure in reliability: someone returns when they said they would, remembers a concern, or remains curious during disagreement. The pleasure need not compete with passion. It can give passion a relationship in which both people have more room to be present.

An experiment in giving desire more information

Choose a manageable situation in a relationship where requests and refusals are safe. You can also use a fictional situation or rehearse privately. Notice an event, your interpretation, the action you felt pulled to take, and what happened afterward. Consider at least two possible explanations before deciding what the event means.

Choose a small adjustment: ask directly about an agreement, allow a reasonable delay before sending another message, keep an existing plan with a friend, or express a preference you have been suppressing. Predict something concrete. You may expect uneasiness to remain while the conversation becomes clearer, or discover whether the other person follows through.

Fictional illustration: Someone feels anxious when a new partner is unavailable for an evening. Instead of canceling their own plans to wait, they keep a dinner with friends and discuss communication expectations the next day. The partner listens and offers an arrangement they can keep. The person still feels some uncertainty. The useful result is more information and a wider evening, rather than complete reassurance.

If the partner repeatedly breaks the arrangement, that changes the next step. The issue may be reliability rather than the person's inability to regulate. If keeping plans was a way to avoid a promised conversation, accountability belongs in the review. A practice must remain open to either correction.

Afterward, ask whether there was more truth, choice, and room for both people. Did you feel clearer, unchanged, more pressured, or uncertain? What did the other person actually do? What do you want to keep, change, or leave open? One encounter cannot establish the relationship's future, but it can contribute to a more accurate understanding.

Love that leaves more room for life

You can remain interested in desire without making intensity its own explanation. Attraction may contain pleasure, admiration, fear, recognition, longing, and hope. Giving these experiences names can make them less likely to decide everything at once.

Over time, notice the shape of your life around the relationship. Can you stay connected to friends and values? Can care be received and offered? Can a difference remain a difference? Do repairs change the

next encounter? These questions offer more useful guidance than a verdict based on how calm or activated you feel.

The direction is a relationship in which passion has room to become intimacy, and intimacy has room for two people. Tenderness need not depend on terror to feel meaningful. Belonging need not be purchased through disappearance. A compelling feeling can be honored while you continue learning what the relationship makes possible.

Sources and further reading

These sources contribute attachment theory, clinical frameworks, developmental synthesis, and relationship research. They do not establish a reader's history or a measured biological explanation of attraction. The practice is educational, and its illustration fictional.

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