

What You Need to Know About Love

By Dr. Sue Johnson,
Author of *Hold Me Tight*

I am sitting in a restaurant shamelessly eavesdropping on a conversation at the next table. “People who expect all this woo woo stuff — love and closeness in marriage — are out of their minds,” declares an elegantly dressed woman to her friend. “If you’re lucky in love, you get a reasonable roommate and even that is just the luck of the draw. No-one will ever figure love out.” I can’t help myself. I lean across the space between us and whisper, “No — that’s not true. We really *do* know about the woo woo stuff. We have cracked the code of love and you don’t need luck! We know how to do it!”

The new science of love and loving has been evolving for over a decade. Now, as we begin the 21st century, we finally know what love is about and how it works. Here’s what we’ve learned:

- The need we have as children to be able to call to a special one and know that this person will respond with reassurance and comfort never goes away. To know that we are loved is the safe haven we all long for. The longing for this is wired into our brains from the cradle to the grave.
- The strongest among us are not those who can take or leave other people, but who can risk and reach out to them. These individuals know how to send clear emotional signals that pull others close. And close connection makes us stronger. Many months after 9/11, survivors who were comfortable turning to loved ones seemed to recover well, while those who turned away or were scared about relying on others still struggled with the ghosts of that day.
- Our brains are wired to see emotional isolation as dangerous and send a panic signal when we cannot get a loved one to respond. If we can’t reconnect, we either shut down or get demanding. Both of these strategies can backfire and push our lover away.
- When we have that special closeness to a loved one, while making love or just holding each other, we are flooded with a cuddle hormone, called oxytocin, found only in animals that are monogamous when they mate. Oxytocin gives us a sense of calm joy, while also tamping down our stress hormones.
- Conflicts about the kids, sex or money don’t make or break a relationship. What really matters is emotional connection. Underneath the discord, the real issue is that partners are questioning the security of their bond: “Are you there for me?” “Can I count on you to respond to me — to put me first?” When couples understand the fundamental issue, they can help each other reconnect. Then problems about the kids, sex or money are just differences, not relationship bombs.

Can this emerging knowledge help you come to a better understanding of your love relationship and build a closer, stronger and more trusting connection with your partner? Yes! You can learn to send clear emotional signals to your partner in a series of focused conversations that you can have with your partner. These

conversations are the central element of emotionally focused couple therapy or EFT. This therapy doesn't give couples tips to tone down conflict or manuals on how to be nicer to each other. It teaches partners how to express our most basic needs and fears and how to engage in conversations that foster a secure, enduring and loving bond.

Twenty-five years of research tells us that after EFT, 7 out of 10 unhappy couples are able to repair their relationship. They are able to:

Step out of what I call the Demon Dialogues where partners get stuck in spirals of negative emotions and wind up shutting down and shutting their partner out, or in becoming so demanding in an effort to counter the lack of connection that they push their partner away. When you understand the emotions that you and your partner feel, you can see these spirals of disconnection as they are happening. Dealing with emotional disconnection in a positive way is a huge part of making your love relationship strong.

Forgive the injuries and hurts that poison love relationships and learn to trust again. If we understand the exquisite logic of love — we can understand how to heal the wounds love inflicts. The key moment in this forgiveness is when injured partners look into the eyes of their partner and see that their pain is shared. They are not alone.

But most important of all, these couples can then create Hold Me Tight conversations. These positive exchanges of loving responsiveness cultivate the close connection we all long for. I recall one couple. "I get so freaked out when I hear that disappointment or frustration in your voice," Tim finally confided to Amy. "I guess I just run. I talk about tasks or concrete issues to get away from the feelings. I don't know how to tell you that I go all hopeless. A voice in my head says that I will never make it with you. At these times, I need to know that you are my lady, even if I am just blundering along and make all these mistakes." When Tim is open like this, he gives Amy what she has always wanted. She tells him, "I don't need a perfect Tim. I just need you to be with me, to share with me like this."

This kind of conversation creates the kind of safe connection that we all need and is the formula, at last we have one, for a lifetime of love.

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