



Dr. Bennett Flaum

All You Need is Love!



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What is this thing called love and how does one find it? These questions have filled the minds of both philosophers and poets over the ages. More recently, the quest for love has been echoed in songs and ballads, plays and operas. Love can be described as the essence of the Universal Soul, the vital force that gives meaning and order to Life itself.

The search for love begins first looking within. The good news is that we appear to be innately wired for a capacity to give and receive love, as seen in the instant bond formed between a mother and her newborn child. For the lucky few, the process of growing up in a stable, nurturing family environment affords the opportunity to develop a sense of trust and ease in cultivating intimate relationships with others.

For most of us, however, the “slings and arrows” of early childhood misfortunes often leave us with emotional scars that we carry with us into adulthood. This emotional baggage may easily hinder our ability to truly experience love unless we work hard to heal our psyche and resolve our issues. Thus, the process of finding love begins by first learning to love ourselves.

Over many years of clinical work, the authors have witnessed the amazing capacity of the human spirit to heal itself, despite the presence of earlier life traumas. In the process of sharing their life dramas, clients are able to develop a greater awareness of who they really are. With this increasing insight, they also learn to open themselves up to new opportunities to establish healthier relationships with others.

For some, these epiphanies happen in the process of the therapist-client encounter. For others, the dialogue with a close friend may also offer the opportunity for self discovery. Finally, intensive work with a journaling technique, ongoing involvement with a meditation practice, or the power of prayer itself may offer alternative pathways for illumination, healing, and transformation.

As we learn to love ourselves more fully, we begin to make better life choices in finding more appropriate romantic partners as well. We stop searching for love from those who will replicate our earlier life traumas of abuse, betrayal, rejection, and abandonment, and find more suitable partners with a deeper capacity to nurture and validate us. Thus, as we develop greater self-love, we attract to us others who also resonate at a higher frequency of emotional health and maturity.

In terms of finding our soul mate, scientific research has also provided some clues to help ease our search for romantic love. Among the relevant factors that have emerged are similarity and proximity. In response to the age-old debate of whether “birds of a feather” truly “flock together,” or the notion that opposites attract, there seems to be strong support for the first premise asserting the relationship between similarity and attraction.

Aristotle postulated over 2000 years ago that people who agree with one another become friends while those who disagree do not. Additionally, the majority of social psychological research findings note that close friends and lovers share similar attitudes, interests and beliefs. The greater the proportion of similar attitudes, the greater the liking or attraction. The relationship between similarity and attraction also appears to be true cross-culturally as well.

Why do similar attitudes affect attraction? One explanation is that similar attitudes arouse positive affect, while disagreement arouses negative affect. We tend to avoid situations where negative affect is aroused. According to Newcomb’s Balance Theory, when two friends like each other and share similar attitudes, positive affect is aroused. When people like each other but disagree, an unpleasant emotional state occurs. Friends try to rectify this situation by changing their attitudes in order to reach agreement. Byrne (1970) argues, based on classical conditioning theory, that similarity is rewarding to us because it’s reassuring to know that others perceive the world as we do.

The similarity attraction relationship applies to physical attraction as well. We all would like to date someone who is successful, gorgeous, and famous; but most of us wind up in friendship or marriage with someone similar to ourselves. Attractive individuals date attractive-looking individuals, and average-looking individuals usually date average-looking individuals. In one study, individuals were matched through a computer dating service. Those who found their date to be of similar attractiveness were likely to continue dating after the initial meeting.

There is one additional variable that deserves mention; namely, proximity. The formation of a close friendship or romantic attachment is likely between those in the same proximity. In one study, married couples attending the same college, formed more close friendships with those living next door to them than with those living distantly. Why is there a relationship between attraction and proximity? One possible explanation is that those in the same proximity see each other more frequently. Simply seeing a person frequently can increase your liking for that person. In conclusion, while some of us may travel to exotic locales or search computer data bases for love, just remember that your romantic partner may be living in your own backyard.

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