



## **Falling in Love, Staying in Love**

This time of year finds us between two “romantic” holidays, New Year’s Eve, when we want to be with that special someone at the magical stroke of midnight, and Valentine’s Day, when we celebrate all that being in love means. It is almost unthinkable that we should spend either of these days alone when the rest of the world seems to be running around in pairs. It is also the time of year when we examine our lives and resolve to make changes, one of which may be to find or rekindle the excitement and passion of new love.

Humans are a contrary species. We want both the safety, security and comfort of a committed relationship as well as the breathless, swept off one’s feet exhilaration of being newly in love. As in most things, we have come to expect that we cannot have it all. How often have we heard, or been told, that someone loves somebody but is no longer “in love” with them? How many of us really understand what that means? Do we believe there is a difference or is it just another way to leave a relationship? Is it possible to fall in love and stay in love? Yes, but first you must understand the process.

When we fall in love the world looks and feels different. The sun shines brighter, colors are more vivid, food tastes better, everything is more intense. We can stay up all night and still have energy to burn. Our every waking moment is focused on that special someone and their very presence can make the most mundane chore seem like an amusement park ride. We don’t give a second thought to things that just a short time ago consumed us. Our lives feel out of control but we are enthralled by the wild ride and have no intention of getting off. It is like we have found the perfect drug and in a way we have.

Falling in love is like being high on drugs, but these drugs are naturally produced by the body. The brain releases two neurotransmitters, dopamine and norepinephrine, when you become attracted to someone and start to fall in love. These neurotransmitters are responsible for your bright outlook, your increased energy and your sharpened sense of perception. Another neurotransmitter, phenylethylamine (PEA), is released when you are with your love giving you a sense of comfort and security. When you are separated levels of PEA drop causing your mood to crash and you experience symptoms of withdrawal, commonly called love sickness.

This stage of love also has a strong psychological component. You see your new love as made for you and completely without flaws. This person knows and meets all your needs without your needing to ask, or even mention. He/she is the solution to all of your emotional problems and will heal all of your childhood wounds. His/her love will make you whole and happy. In the immortal words in Jerry McGuire, your new love will “complete you.”

Unfortunately, this top-of-the-world euphoria will not last. Usually within six months reality sets in and by the time eighteen to thirty-six months go by you are no longer “in love”. Our bodies are not meant to function in that heightened state for any longer than that. The initial surge of attraction and euphoria is an evolutionary strategy designed to ensure survival of the species. The time allotted to being in love is long enough to act on the attraction, begin the process of procreation and develop a more committed relationship. This new relationship needs to be a deeper and more intimate one that is consciously created if it is to last.

Creating a lasting and fulfilling relationship with one person requires commitment, the ability to compromise and a certain level of tolerance for emotional anxiety. We cling to the notion of “being in love” because in that state we feel alive and connected to those around us. We feel that we will die if we are not deeply connected to someone else. However, when we look to others to “complete us” we lose our ability to stand on our own two feet. We cannot survive as a separate entity if we only feel whole in the presence of another. The ability to function as an independent entity is what allows us to be truly and deeply connected to another. We are not a couple out of fear of being alone but because we make a conscious choice to be together.

A successful, long term relationship requires work and effort. It is based on giving up the fantasy of finding our “one true soul mate” and being secure enough to let our partner know how important he/she is in our lives. It requires us to love and honor our partner and put their needs and desires on a par with or above our own. Unfortunately most people do not have the tools that will enable them to make a success of a relationship once the bloom is off the rose of love. Our natural tendency is to retreat into ourselves when we are faced with an uncomfortable or unfamiliar situation. It is at this point that we must focus outward if we are to have a successful and fulfilling intimate relationship.

The first step is to be able to see the world through your partner’s eyes. The longer you are with someone the more your acts of love need to reflect their wants and desires instead of your own. If your partner’s idea of fun is to raft down swirling rapids, surprising him with a slow cruise around the Caribbean may not elicit the desired response. If your partner is overworked and stressed out doing a load of laundry or cleaning up the kitchen may be appreciated more than candy and flowers.

Another element necessary to a lifelong relationship is excitement. Excitement releases PEA into your system, gets your heart racing and brings back that intense initial feeling to your relationship. This recharges the system and deepens the emotional bonds. Making time to step outside the usual routine and focusing on being a couple on a regular basis can recharge your relationship.

Relationships take daily effort. It is easy to fall into a routine and take your relationship for granted. It is necessary to nurture the relationship as if it were a separate personality. It has needs that need to be met if it is to thrive and endure. It needs your time and attention as much as any other aspect of your life. You need to be mindful of your relationship and pay attention to its patterns. A relationship requires mutual respect between you and your partner. We often treat complete strangers better than those close to us. Be aware of how you treat each other. Make time for playfulness and surprise. These qualities will bring back memories of your initial love for each other. Don't be afraid to show your sensitive, caring side. Writing a love letter to your partner is a way to let your partner know how much you love him/her. Being vulnerable is scary but the payoff may be more consideration and passion from your partner. Create occasions for celebration that have deep meaning for you and your partner. Use what you know about each other's history to surprise and delight each other. This connecting to a time when you did not know each other can create amazingly deep bonds.

As the celebratory day of love approaches revel in the joy of new found love if you have it. Understand that the constant high it brings is fleeting. If you understand the progression of love you will be able to incorporate this intensity into a more profound and intimate love that really can complete you.