



FEEL THE LOVE

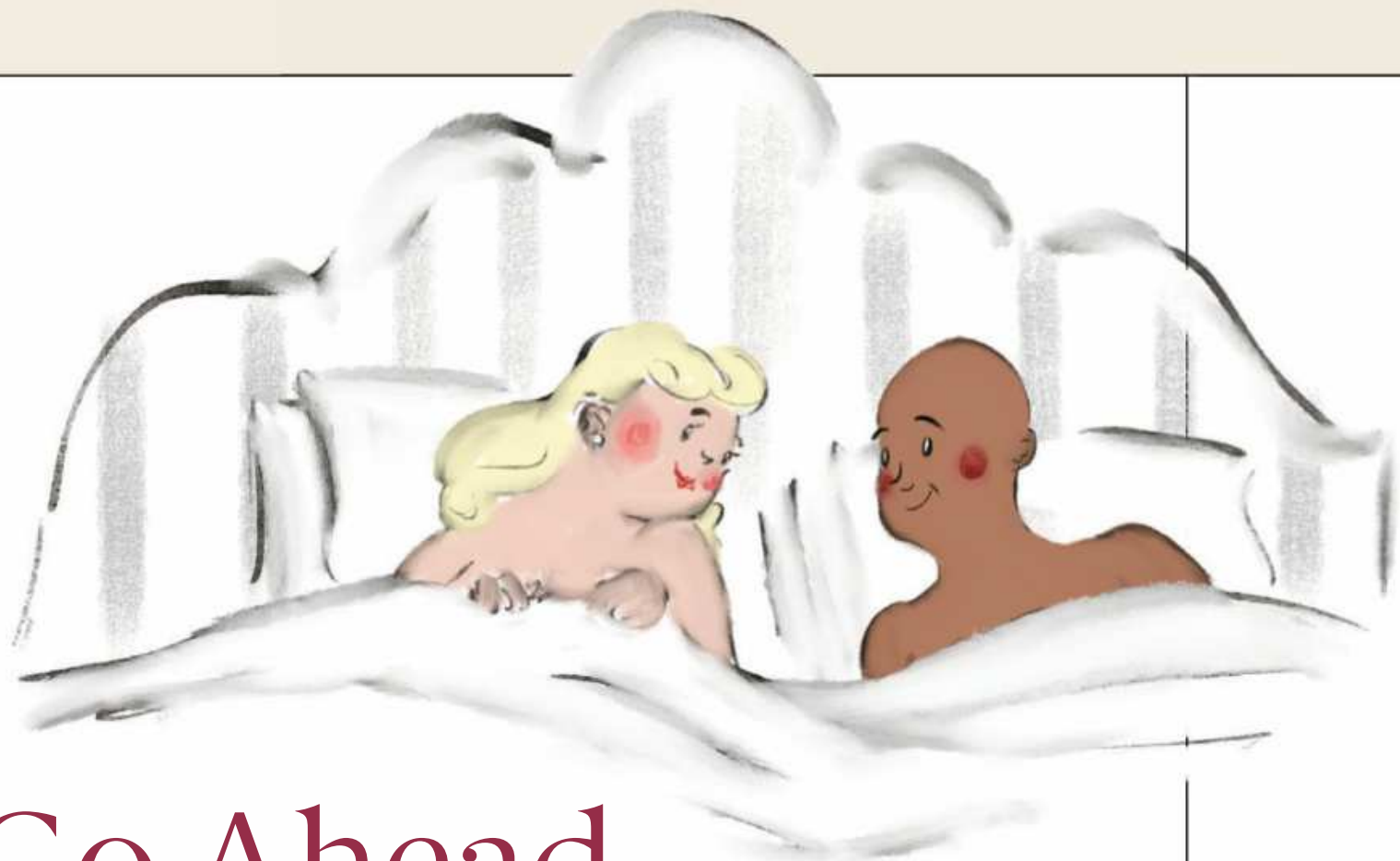
It's a powerful life force, our greatest teacher. It can break our hearts, and then build us back up. In these pages, we look at love from all sides—and share ways to deepen the connections that matter to you most.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY AND DEBORAH COPAKEN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TUG RICE



“All you need is love,” sang the Beatles. It’s a sentiment echoed in rom-coms and on rustic kitchen signs. We obsess over love, crave it. And for good reason: Love is the glue that binds us to the most important people in our lives. ¶ As social animals, we depend on those folks for our emotional and physical health—our very survival, experts say. But the daily work of maintaining our ties is often (being real here) a pain. It takes countless bad dates to find a mate. Raising a baby can be like having an alarm clock that goes off all night long. Your siblings know how to push every one of your buttons. And your best friend is awful about texting. ¶ Fortunately for us, we are wired to find love—all kinds—irresistible: “Love evolved to bribe us to commence and maintain those relationships,” explains Anna Machin, PhD, an evolutionary anthropologist at Oxford University in England and author of the forthcoming book *Why We Love*. ¶ Though much about love remains a mystery, we know it can be nurturing, humbling, and healing, and that it’s typically worth every ounce of effort.



Go Ahead, Get Vulnerable

There's no question that opening yourself up—even to loved ones—can feel daunting. But vulnerability is essential, experts say. “In our quest to be accepted, we feel pressure to hide our imperfections and weaknesses. We erect shields,” explains Anna Osborn, LPCC, a marriage and family therapist in Sacramento, California. “Vulnerability requires we drop those shields.” It means sharing your deepest feelings, needs, and hopes, so the real you can be seen. “By not being authentic, you risk something bigger: the opportunity to grow truly close.”

Start with baby steps. When a loved one asks how your day went, you may reflexively reply, “OK.” Next time, answer more honestly, suggests certified couples therapist Alicia Muñoz, LPC, author of the couple's journal *A Year of Us*. For example, you might admit you're worried about blowing a project at work. See how that disclosure feels.

Test the waters. “An important part of vulnerability is reciprocity,” says Osborn. After you share something intimate with a friend, notice her response: Does she share a meaningful truth of her own, or does she change the subject? “Trust should be built mutually.”

Ask for help. Though it may go against all your self-sufficiency instincts, allow yourself to be rescued every now and then. “Helping each other during life's struggles is what draws relationships closer,” says Osborn.

Undo taboos. Anxiety, sadness, loneliness—we tend to cover up these feelings to avoid seeming needy to the people around us. But we often unintentionally convey the opposite (hurtful) message: “I'm perfectly fine without you.” Try to be more open about your most tender experiences, says Muñoz. “When you do, shame decreases. ‘Unacceptable’ feelings are reclaimed. It revitalizes your relationship, because it allows you both to access a fuller emotional range.” —J.K.L.

CLOSER LOOK:
ROMANTIC LOVE

HEART AFFAIRS

Imaging studies show that when we're falling for someone, seeing that person—or even just thinking about them—lights up the brain's reward center. Imagine fireworks in your brain, says Bianca Acevedo, PhD, a researcher in the psychology department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Levels of dopamine, known as the feel-good neurotransmitter, spike. And physical intimacy triggers a rise in oxytocin, a calming chemical that plays a major role in bonding.

No surprise: Sex also helps fan the spark over time. “We see lots of overlap in the parts of the brain that light up when you are sexually satisfied and the parts that light up when you feel romantic love. Sex enforces romantic feelings,” says Acevedo. “Friendship and play are powerful bonds, too,” she adds. “We care for our romantic partners, are willing to sacrifice for them, and want to be there for the hard stuff too.”

BUILD YOUR CONNECTION

Happy long-term couples often engage in self-expanding activities—that is, any pursuit that's fresh and exciting to them. Trying new things helps partners grow as individuals and also as a pair, says Acevedo. Whether you and your S.O. have been fantasizing about a Rocky Mountain road trip or taking an Indian cooking class, now you have another reason to find time and go for it. —J.K.L.

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That's the percentage of nearly 1,900 study participants who reported that their current or most recent romantic partnership began as a friendship, according to research published in July in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Those couples were platonic pals for one to two years on average before their romance blossomed.

LIFE SUPPORT

Loving a friend is completely voluntary. You keep showing up for each other purely because you want to. That dynamic can be incredibly validating, says clinical psychologist Andrea Bonior, PhD, author of *The Friendship Fix*. Also, there's less pressure on your relationships with pals. You don't have to share a bathroom or divvy up chores. Plus, you can surround yourself with a whole cast of friends with different qualities. "We don't need to depend on one person to fulfill all our needs," says Bonior. These bennies add up: A 2017 study by a Michigan State University researcher found that among older adults, supportive friendships were a stronger predictor of health and happiness than their relationships with their family members.

BUILD YOUR CONNECTIONS In the bustle of adulting, hangouts can easily slip off your to-do list. But you really need to prioritize time with close friends, says Bonior. "It is just as necessary as other kinds of self-care, like exercise or brushing your teeth." One hack: Carve out a regular routine—schedule a coffee or cocktail every other Tuesday, for example, or a Sunday morning phone call. —J.K.L.

Why are we gaga for our pets?

Our relationships with our animals are beautifully simple, says Kristyn Vitale, PhD, an assistant professor of animal health and behavior at Unity College in Maine: "Pets elicit so much love because we can act like our true selves around them, without fear or embarrassment." —J.K.L.

Cherishing You

Psychotherapist Meghan Watson, MA, RP, often sees people struggling in their most important relationship: the one they have with themselves. "When you learn to love yourself and know how that feels, you open yourself to more love from others too," says Watson, who serves as the resident therapist for Alkeme Health, a wellness platform for the Black community. Here, she shares her wisdom on this crucial practice. —J.K.L.

How do you define self-love? The term can sound indulgent, narcissistic. But it doesn't mean giving yourself constant ego strokes or reciting empty affirmations. Instead, it is turning toward yourself with acceptance, compassion, and nurturing.

Why is it so hard for many women? We have a lifetime of external messages that love is conditional, only accessible to us if we achieve professional success or have a certain body type. We internalize these impossible messages. Self-love is a belief in your own unwavering value, regardless of others' judgments.

Is it hard for you too? Oh, yes! I'm a Black immigrant queer woman. Learning to love myself has been nothing short of a radical act in the face of racism and microaggressions. Black women are taught to be strong and take care of everyone else. Self-love for me has meant learning to shake off these external expectations and allow myself the grace to express anger, to rest, to be tender and vulnerable.

What advice do you have for others? You can start by stating your intention to yourself: "I am worthy and I will show myself loving care." To counteract your inner self-critic, practice gratitude. What are you grateful for about yourself? But really, that's the easy part. Moving toward self-love can also be hard and even painful. An important step is setting firm boundaries. It is honoring your own needs. One boundary I have is blocking out time in my crazy calendar just for me. It gives me space to just be, not do. To realize I am enough.





Lesson Lived

Deborah Copaken learned what she really needed in a partner from relationships that were never meant to last.

The collapse of my two-decade marriage coincided with the rise of app dating. But when you're 47 years old with three kids, two jobs, one illness after the other, and a deep sadness over the failures of your life, both real and perceived, it's not like you look at yourself in the mirror and think, Start swiping!

Then, exactly one year into my solo-parenting solitude, I woke up feeling both lonely enough to take action and strong enough to deal with the consequences. I signed up for Hinge, then Tinder, then, a few months later when it was invented, Bumble. What was I looking for? Well, love, of course. Duh. Which was my first rookie mistake.

The first man in my age range played so many games, I couldn't keep up with the rules. The second lived too far away. The third tried to stick his tongue down my throat after I'd told him to get lost. The 4th, 5th, 12th, and 23rd? You don't even want to know.

OK, I thought. Time to pivot. Forget about love. How about I just find the occasional partner for sex? Sex is good! Human touch is healthy. I lowered my age range on the apps from 45 to 30, which is how I met the two men—each 19 years my junior, each cognizant of the other's existence—who would teach me more about love than any guidebook or fairy tale.

No, I did not live happily ever after with either man. But I did practice what I liked to call "live and let love,"

a radical acceptance of love in the here and now without any notion of ownership, monogamy, or duration. This paradigm shift from seeking out sole possession of one forever love to accepting ephemeral love from two willing partners ironically allowed me to focus in on what I wanted from a monogamous, long-term relationship, should I be lucky enough to find one: kindness, empathy, joy, lack of conflict, honesty, fun, spontaneity, generosity, a sense of humor, and—most important of all, since this had been previously denied to me—the grace and willingness to show up in times of need.

Love, in other words, as a verb, not a noun.

When I nearly died from vaginal cuff dehiscence (a rare complication from a trachelectomy), one of my younger lovers showed up at my bedside with food and company. The other insisted I join him in Nepal so he could be my caretaker as I recovered. More recently, the former rushed to the apartment I'd been sharing with my age-appropriate partner of four years, after our relationship suddenly imploded. "He doesn't deserve you," said my former young lover, as we stared out at the Statue of Liberty. "But someone else will." Further proof that love need not last, in the traditional sense, to be both real and long-lasting.

Copaken's latest book is *Ladyparts: A Memoir*.

CLOSER LOOK:
FAMILY LOVE

TIES THAT BIND

"You can divorce a spouse; you can end a friendship. You can't divorce your brother," says Kory Floyd, PhD, professor of interpersonal communication at the University of Arizona in Tucson and author of *The Loneliness Cure*. The bonds we have with family members are formed at birth and can last a lifetime. That sense of permanence can allow for a bedrock kind of love, says Floyd. "There is an unwritten rule that family is going to be there for you when you need them. They will drop everything."

Of course, not every family of origin offers such a safe harbor; some of us create our own chosen families and find much the same solace there. Close friends can also offer us unconditional support, says Bonior—"the ones] who know and accept us for who we are, and with whom we can build a history."

BUILD YOUR CONNECTIONS

Don't make the mistake of taking your family members for granted. Create a habit of conveying your affection: Floyd's research has found that physical expressions of love between people who care about each other can have measurable perks. "A hug can reduce blood pressure and cortisol levels for both of you," he says. And if you are not a huggy-kissy bunch, a simple touch on the shoulder or a heartfelt "I love you" will also tighten your bonds. —J.K.L.