How Science Can Help You Fall in Love

Nothing is more fulfilling than being in a successful love relationship. Yet we leave our love lives entirely to chance. Maybe we don’t have to anymore.  

By Robert Epstein

The best way to get students interested in scientific studies is to give them hands-on experiences that get them excited about the subject matter. In chemistry courses, teachers accomplish that with test tubes and mysterious liquids. In a course I taught recently at the University of California, San Diego, on relationship science, I piqued my students’ interest with exercises on, well, love.
The researchers found that mutual eye gazing (but not gazing at hands) produced rapid increases in feelings of both liking and loving in total strangers.

To begin, I invited eight students who did not know each other to come to the front of the auditorium, where I paired them up randomly. I then asked each individual to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how much he or she liked, loved, or felt close to his or her partner. Then I asked the couples to look deeply into each other’s eyes in an exercise I call Soul Gazing.

There was some giggling at first and then some very intense gazing. After two minutes, I again asked for the numbers. The result? A modest 7 percent increase in liking (meaning 1 point added for one person in one couple), an 11 percent increase in liking, and a whopping 45 percent increase in closeness. There were gasps and cheers in the audience. When I asked everyone in the class to pair up for two minutes of gazing, 89 percent of the students said the exercise increased feelings of intimacy. And that was just the beginning....

Eye Contact
About 50 percent of first marriages fail in the U.S., as do two thirds of second marriages and three quarters of third marriages. We fail in large part because we enter into relationships with poor skills for maintaining them and highly unrealistic expectations.

A study of arranged marriages in which love has grown eventually—often within a mere 18 months—the fog of passion dissipated, and we begin to see our partner with new clarity. All too often we react by saying, “Who are you?” or “You’ve changed.” We might try hard for years after that to keep things going, especially if children are in the picture. But if we start out with the wrong person and lack basic tools for resolving conflicts and communicating, the chances that we will succeed are slim to none.

Over the years, having looked carefully at the fast-growing scientific literature on relationship science and having conducted some new research of my own, I have come to believe that there is a definite fix for our poor performance in romantic relationships. The fix is to extract a practical technology from the research and then teach people how to use it.

1. **Two as One.** Embracing each other gently, begin to sense your partner’s breathing and gradually try to synchronize your breathing with his or hers. After a few minutes, you might feel that the two of you have merged.

2. **Soul Gazing.** Standing or sitting about two feet away from each other, look deeply into each other’s eyes, trying to look into the very core of your beings. Do this for about two minutes and then talk about what you saw.

3. **Monkey Love.** Standing or sitting fairly near each other, start moving your hands, arms and legs any way you like—but in a fashion that perfectly imitates your partner’s. This is fun but also challenging. You will both feel as if you are moving voluntarily, but your actions are also linked to those of your partner.

4. **Falling in Love.** This is a trust exercise, one of many that increase mutual feelings of vulnerability. From a standing position, simply let yourself fall backward into the arms of your partner. Then trade places. Repeat several times and then talk about your feelings. Strangers who do this exercise sometimes feel connected to each other for years.

5. **Secret Swap.** Write down a deep secret and have your partner do the same. Then trade papers and talk about what you read. You can continue this process until you have run out of secrets. Better yet, save some of your secrets for another day.

6. **Mind-Reading Game.** Write down a thought that you want to convey to your partner. Then spend a few minutes trying to broadcast that thought to him or her, as he or she tries to guess what it is. If he or she cannot guess, reveal what you were thinking. Then switch roles.

7. **Let Me Inside.** Stand about four feet away from each other and focus on each other. Every 10 seconds or so move a bit closer until, after several shifts, you are well inside each other’s personal space (the boundary is about 18 inches). Get as close as you can without touching. (My students tell me this exercise often ends with kissing.)

8. **Love Aura.** Place the palm of your hand as close as possible to your partner’s palm without actually touching. Do this for several minutes, during which you will feel not only heat but also, sometimes, eerie kinds of sparks.

9. **Mind-Reading Exercise.** One of many that increase mutual feelings of vulnerability, this one is simple: just gaze into each other’s eyes and then talk about what you saw. You can continue this process until you have run out of secrets. Better yet, save some of your secrets for another day.

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When your spouse is sick or in an otherwise vulnerable state, you may feel a need to protect and care for him, drawing you closer together.

Soul Gazing is one of dozens of exercises I have distilled from scientific studies that make people feel vulnerable and increase intimacy. Love Aura, Let Me Inside and Secret Swap are other examples of fun, bond-building activities that any couple can undertake, and nearly all the students in the course reported using these techniques. Nearly all the exercises she tried with her friend boosted ratings between 10 and 19 percent, but most impressive was the outcome of gazing with someone she barely knew: a 70 percent increase in intimacy. One student did the assignment with her husband of five years. The couple, Asa and Gill, tried out eight different exercises, and even though their “before” scores were usually very high (9s and 10s), every exercise they tried increased their scores by at least 3 percent. Overall, Asa wrote, “I noticed a drastic change in our bond for one another. My husband seems more affectionate now than he was, for which I am really grateful.” She also reported a boost in closeness, especially for Brian. By the sixth week, Jocelyn’s love for Brian had risen from a 1 to a 6 on a 10-point scale, and Brian’s love for Jocelyn had climbed from a 2 to a 7. Brian and Jocelyn might have made progress without the exercises, but both felt the activities had helped.

### Extra Credit for Love

**Jocelyn**, aged 21, and **Brian**, aged 25, are students at the University of California, San Diego, where they tried some of the love-generating techniques I learned in the author’s class on relationship science. These graphs show changes in feelings of liking (blue), closeness (pink) and loving (red) over six weeks. Each week the students tried one exercise. At the outset, they liked each other fairly well but experienced little closeness or love. In the first week, the gazing technique had a big effect on closeness, especially for Brian. By the sixth week, Jocelyn’s love for Brian had risen from a 1 to a 6 on a 10-point scale, and Brian’s love for Jocelyn had climbed from a 2 to a 7. Brian and Jocelyn might have made progress without the exercises, but both felt the activities had helped.

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### Taking Control

The students in my course were doing something new—taking control over their love lives. We grow up on fairy tales and movies in which magical forces help people find their soul mates, with whom they effortlessly live happily ever after. The fairy tales leave us powerless, putting our love lives into the hands of the fates. But here in a surprise: most of the world has never heard of those fairy tales. Instead more than half of marriages on our globe are brokered by parents or professional matchmakers, whose main concerns are long-term suitability and family harmony. In India an estimated 95 percent of the marriages are arranged, and although divorce is legal, India has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world. (This is starting to change, of course, as Western ways encroach on traditional society.)

Young couples in India generally have a choice about whether to proceed, and the combination of choice and sound guidance probably accounts for the fact that studies of arranged marriages in India indicate that they measure up well—in, for example, longevity, satisfaction and love—against Western marriages. Indeed, the love experienced by Indian couples in arranged marriages appears to be even more robust than the love people experience in “love marriages.” In a 1982 study psychologists Usha Gupta and Pushpa Singh of the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur, India, used the Rubin Love Scale, which gauges intense, romantic, Western-style love, to determine that love in love marriages in India does exactly what it does in love marriages here: it starts high and declines rapidly. But love in the

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Kaiser and Shelly Haque of Minneapolis met only once before their marriage was arranged in Bangladesh more than 11 years ago. Since then, the couple’s love for each other has grown, an emotional trajectory that is not uncommon in arranged marriages.

said their love grew when they had children with their spouse. Studies in the U.S. routinely find partners to be a threat to feelings of spousal love, but perhaps that tendency results from the strong feelings and unrealistic expectations that launch our relationships. The stress of raising children tends to disrupt those expectations and ultimately our positive feelings for each other.

Creating Love

A careful look at arranged marriage, combined with the knowledge accumulating in relationship science, has the potential to give us real control over our love lives—without practicing arranged marriage. Americans want it all—the freedom to choose a partner and the deep, lasting love of fantasies and fairy tales. We can achieve that kind of love by learning about and practicing techniques that build love over time. And when our love is fading, we can use such techniques to rebuild that love. The alternative—leaving it to chance—makes little sense.

(Further Reading)

- The author’s ongoing survey of arranged marriages (including how to participate in it) is available at http://ArrangedMarriageSurvey.com
- Test your relationship skills at http://MyLoveSkills.com
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