



Love actually

James Earl looks at the difference between love - and love.



Love is so many things. The ancient Greeks maintained there were eight distinct forms. It's fascinating to use their model to see how many ways we are experiencing love right now, and what we might be missing.

Not all these forms of love were seen as good. For example, mania, the obsessive love we often feel at the beginning of a relationship, not only distorts our thinking, but can be painful (however much we like 'falling in love'). We hate the thought of being away from the object of our affection, or the possibility we may lose them, and can think of little else. Fortunately,

that 'crazy, infatuated' stage of a relationship doesn't last that long. In the form of morbid jealousy, which we can, of course, experience later in a relationship, mania is never good.

Eros, on the other hand, is usually welcome. We generally enjoy feelings of sexual desire, and the pleasures of a physical relationship. Eros is often confused

with sex, but it has more to do with the erotic thoughts and feelings that make us excited than the physical acts of love. We can experience eros with or without partner: as a heightened state of experiencing ourselves and the world, not that different from our aesthetic sense (we can temporarily be transported, for example, by music). Even by ourselves, experiencing eros is a form of love, however: because love is more a state of mind than a relationship.

First flush

Eros is often associated with the early stages of a relationship, much like mania. It also usually diminishes as a relationship progresses: we may certainly have less sex, and often less exciting sex. One reason for this is that eros with a new partner is a important way we begin to bond with them and learn to trust them. When this job is done, it becomes, arguably, less important. (Yes, we can still miss it!)

Eros is almost always accompanied by another form of love - ludus. This is the fun that we all want: a relaxed, playful form of love that may be expressed in just hanging out with our partner, taking a walk with them, dancing around the kitchen, playing cards, chess or a board game, having a pillow fight or discussing the meaning of life.

Ludus is characterised by smiling and laughter, and you can

experience it not just with your partner, but hopefully with one or two close friends, too. In couples, however, it often the prelude to eros - without ludus, it's difficult to find a way into sex. In couples where ludus is really strong, sex is often much less of an issue, even years in.

As a couple moves from the honeymoon stage to the long-term, pragma moves to the forefront. The key idea in pragma is commitment: a deepening lovingness and a wish to be with your partner ('I hope I will be waking up with you in 20 years' time'). It is also the love of pragmatism: building a secure base for you and your partner, making plans and demonstrating safety, security, comfort and a sense of home.

It can sometimes seem that we trade one form of love for another in long-term relationships, swapping eros for pragma, for example. But in the Greek conception, these are equally important aspects of love, and which is dominant merely reflects time and circumstance.

Loving cocoon

Pragma often goes hand-in-hand with storge, the love we give and receive in our family, and in particular the loving cocoon we try to create around our children. It is in some ways the most elemental of all forms of love, because it is the earliest love we experienced (if we were lucky). Recreating that sense of family as an adult can be one of the

most comforting and fulfilling forms of love. If storge was missing, weak or inconsistent for us as children, it may therapeutic for us to right the wrongs of the past and bring our kids up in a way that demonstrates storge.

We have already said that we may experience ludus (playfulness) with our friends, not just our partner. But we can also feel loyalty, lovingness, pride and connection to our friends - and this is termed philia. Even in modern Greek culture, declaring ▶

The eight forms of love*

Eros
(passionate love)

Ludus
(playful love)

Philautia
(self love)

Mania
(obsessive love)

Pragma
(committed love)

Storge
(family love)

Philia
(friendship love)

Agape
(compassionate love)

*According to the ancient Greeks

'Eros with a new partner is a way we begin to bond and learn to trust them: when this job is done, it becomes less important'

that someone is your friend, almost always involves this rather profound commitment (compare to the rather throwaway sense of ‘just being mates’).

Agape is a more generalised compassion which we can feel towards everyone: family, friend, or stranger, people we like, are indifferent to, or even dislike. Sharing their joy when they feel joy, and suffering when they suffer, agape is definitely seen as a moral good, and the most aspirational form of love.

A duty to be happy

Finally, we have philautia, which means loving oneself. It is often seen as the necessary precondition to the other forms of love: if you don’t like yourself, how can show others love? In practical terms, it means we have a duty to be happy – not for ourselves, but for others. Feeling an OK-ness in yourself makes you a better resource for other people, rather than displaying unhappiness, grumpiness, negativity, pessimism or even self-loathing.

So, which of these types of love do you experience now? In yourself, your relationship, family and with friends?

In adult life, we might think we seek out partners who can replicate the good aspects of our childhood nurturing, and, in particular, avoid potential partners who demonstrate more problematic aspects of our parents’ behaviour.

‘Finding connections between the past and now is one of the best ways to understand ourselves. We are products of our past, but not prisoners of it’



But it’s sometimes more complex than that. How often have you heard someone say, ‘My partner is so like my dad – he never shows his feelings!’ or ‘When my partner gets angry, it reminds me of my mother.’ How do we explain this?

Repeating patterns

We may have an unconscious desire to find a partner who replicates some of the difficult behaviour we experienced early in life. This is a wish to ‘replay’ the old problem, in the hope of achieving a resolution. If a parent was somewhat withholding in their expression of their love, for example, it may be that we look for a

similarly withholding partner, so we can finally achieve the love we always wanted by ‘winning them around’.

In the same way, we may find ourselves replicating some of the less-than-wonderful ‘loving’ behaviour of our early caregivers. This is because things like anger, alcohol, anxiety, depression and emotional avoidance are all ways in which we learn to manage our feelings, and the child learns from the adults around them.

Finding the connections between then and now is one of the best ways to understand ourselves. We are products of our past, but fortunately not prisoners of it. As we have seen, there are many kinds of love, and understanding how we were loved can tell us a great deal about the kinds of love we need today.  jamesearl.com