

CHAPTER 5

What's Love Got To Do With It?

Robert Heinlein, in his novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, gives perhaps the best definition of love yet penned: 'Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own'.

This is undoubtedly a necessary criterion, but is it sufficient? And how does this condition arise, and why is it often not the constant thing that the poets would have us believe, but waxes and wanes and sometimes disappears altogether?

Physiologists and psychologists have given us sufficient clues to enable us now to piece together at least a sketchy picture of how the process works.

The first essential is arousal, which is mediated by hormones and neurotransmitters. Although falling in love is something different from desiring someone for casual sex, sex is very much a part of it. Unless we have the necessary baseline level of testosterone, nothing much is going to happen. Exercise can increase our chances of falling in love by increasing our production of testosterone. Exercise can also increase our production of adrenalin, which produces a state of hyper-awareness, preparedness and exhilaration, as well as raising our levels of aggression sufficiently to make the approach and increasing our response to all sensual stimuli. Though these effects are the same for both sexes, it also has some effects which are different in males and females. In males, it inhibits penile reflexes, toning down the overt sexual effects of testosterone. In females, in combination with oestrogen, it actually increases sexual receptivity. Fear is a much more potent agent in increasing adrenalin than is exercise, which may explain the appeal (as well as the usefulness as a courting device) of horror movies, scary rides and such physically risky activities as skydiving. Serotonin, endorphins and phenylethylamine all inhibit sexual activity while giving us that 'walking on air' feeling.

When we are sufficiently aroused, our urge for attachment to the other person becomes strong. Though sex is normally a central part of the whole process, this urge for attachment is not the same as the sexual urge. It is not that the attachment is for the purpose of sex so much as that sex provides a powerful means of attachment and bonding. But it is by no means the only one and is often not employed until well into the relationship.

Some people find the arousal phase so stimulating and satisfying that they become hooked on it; they become love junkies. They feel an instant and irresistible sexual attraction to someone and, especially if that someone makes a strong play for him or her, fall instantly in love with him or her. This time, he or she tells him or herself, everything will be perfect. Of course, it isn't, but such a person enjoys the lows of an intense relationship - which is allowed to put all other areas of life in the shade - almost as much as its highs. When passion fizzles, they get bored, look around for someone else, and repeat the cycle.

Love is born when we have formed a sufficiently deep attachment to commit ourselves to its maintenance. Another hormone, oxytocin, is deeply involved in stimulating this attachment. It is produced in response to kissing, touching, fondling, as well as in intercourse, and helps to foster the sort of stable, long-term relationship that can lead to the generation and protection of progeny. It is also produced during childbirth and breastfeeding and plays a major role in bonding a mother with her baby.

Love develops and grows in shared intimacy. It is then we realise that the person we love is not the idealised person we fell in love with. This may result in the breakup of the relationship or, if we are flexible enough to cope with this and the changing circumstances of the relationship, may lead to a more realistic compromise which can be the basis for a fuller, more rounded, partnership. It helps considerably if the partners come from similar backgrounds, share the same hopes about what they want from the relationship, and how they envisage family life.

After months or years of shared intimacy, the brain starts releasing endorphins in response to the presence of the partner. These chemicals make people feel warm and secure,

trusting, needed and loved, soothed and comforted.

In the long run, love relationships are like all other partnerships. To be successful, they require both partners to derive something from the partnership. This requires sensitivity to the partner's feelings - in sex, as in other things. It needs consideration, in small things as in large: trivial romantic gestures can do much to sustain a marriage; unreasonable demands or unreasoning anger can destroy it in an instant.

While a regard for the happiness of the other is an essential to love, making it the whole basis for one's life at the expense of one's personal identity diminishes the relationship.

One of the things most injurious to a love relationship is the fairy tale 'living happily ever after' idea - i.e., all one has to do is find one's true love (or soul mate) and everything will be fine. Love relationships, no less than any other, need to be continually worked on to achieve their full potential.

This is no less true of sex than of other aspects. A huge majority of the affairs that occur in about a third of all marriages are triggered by a search for better sex, whether this be more exciting, less boring or simply more frequent. This is as true of religious people as of the non-religious - the religious merely experience more guilt. Extramarital sex often occurs when the marriage is otherwise a happy one, without any serious problems. For good or ill, most straying partners find sex outside marriage no better than that within marriage - though most women say their lovers are better sexually than their husbands, while most unfaithful men would prefer their wives; however, 66 percent of men and 57 percent of women admit they don't love their extramarital partners - and quickly abandon the affair.

Unfortunately, the odds are extremely good that the other partner will have discovered your indiscretion in the meantime. Even if he or she has told you it wouldn't make any difference, the reality is usually quite different. On the other hand, the breakup of the relationship after an affair is by no means inevitable. Only about one in ten people having an extramarital affair marry their lover.

If affairs are not the prime cause of the fact that marriage in many Western societies is as likely as not to end in divorce, what is? Part of the reason is, of course, that it is now much easier than in earlier times to obtain a divorce. No longer does one have to prove adultery or other gross misdemeanour. No longer does there have to be a guilty party and a victim. No longer is collusion between parties a ban on granting a divorce. On the contrary, the basic criterion for divorce in many countries now is that the couple have simply decided they no longer want to live together. This is helped, in many countries, by laws requiring the payment of maintenance and child support by ex-husbands if capable or by the State if not.

There is, however, another important factor. As pointed out in Chapter 1, people tend to choose their mates as the best that they can get. In our mobile and rapidly changing world, this estimation can readily change. If one achieves more fame, money, power, status than one originally felt oneself capable of, one's sense of self-worth may rise to extent that, if the partner has not kept pace, one may feel one has made a poor bargain and opt out. The same process can also occur if the real or potential superior position of the partner disappears or fails to materialise.

Unfortunately, many divorcees end up in another unsatisfactory relationship. This is because they often jump into emotional and sexual intimacy with an idealised partner of whom they have unrealistic expectations and with whom they are sexually awkward and less than honest. They are often far more concerned with their own sexual needs than those of the new partner.

For all the perils of affairs, where sex within marriage is completely unsatisfactory and there is no hope of making it meet one's needs, extramarital sex may sometimes be a solution. This may be so when one partner is incapable of sex or of giving satisfying sex and there are other good reasons for continuing the marriage. It may, on rare occasions, provide knowledge or passion which will rub off on the marriage relationship. In most cases, there will be better solutions available within marriage - but by no means in all.

So, what of the open marriage, where both partners agree to have outside lovers. The trouble with open marriages is that they require a separation of sex and love and an emotional control that is foreign to human nature. Open marriages rarely work and, when they do survive, are less fulfilling than the conventional marriage.

What about the 10-15% of marriages in which sexual intercourse occurs rarely or never? Sometimes, physical separation is the problem. In some of these cases, reunions, though infrequent, may be of such intensity as to more or less make up for absences and provide adequate bonding. In others, the marriage may exist in name only. Sometimes, illness or disability may make intercourse impossible or so difficult as to be hardly worth the effort. In many, but not enough, of these cases, the couples find that there are other forms of loving sex that can fill their needs as well as intercourse. Many are aged couples who have accommodated themselves to the lack of ability or desire for sexual intercourse and are securely bonded by habit, memories and non-sexual loving gestures.

What of the others? Though they may feel they are just as well off without sex, this is rarely the case. They need to change their attitudes to sex, to recognise that they do have a problem, and to acquire the knowledge that will let them deal with their problem.

One of the vitally important elements in a successful love relationship is trust. Each partner must feel that the other is consistently honest, dependable, sincere and genuine in having his or her well-being and interests at heart - in all aspects of the relationship, including money. He or she must feel that his or her partner understands and respects him or her, that he or she is emotionally open and emotionally comfortable with sex, will keep agreements and work to resolve disagreements without either giving vent to anger or bottling it up. And that all this applies whether they are together or apart. Only then can they really have the confidence in the future which is the hallmark of the ideal love relationship.

This is not to say that a little subtle flirting - even in this age of sexual harassment suits - is to be frowned on. Flirting, however, while definitely sexual, is a non-genital activity. It is an affair of sight and sound - of words, gestures and eye contact. Touch should play little or no part. And it is wise not to do it on the job or in any other situation where it could be construed as an abuse of a position of authority.

Flirting will not provoke jealousy in a partner if he or she feels secure in the relationship. If it does, the relationship needs to be worked on.