

The Mystery of True Love

*Not sure if what you feel is authentic love?
Read on.*

By Eileen Spatz



Wow. See what that 7th grade crush did to us--for life? Those super intense emotions, once stoked by the object of our affections back in junior high school, set the stage for a lifetime of trying to replicate them. Whenever you did experience your first love, be it at age 12, 15, 18 or whenever, chances are you have been seeking something that potent ever since.

When cupid's arrow zeros in on us a plethora of pretty amazing physical and emotional reactions occur. The senses are seemingly on fire, with everything in our worlds taking on vivid hues. We become keenly *alive*, suddenly seeing everything in bold Technicolor—the flowers take on richer colors, sunsets become magical watercolor paintings, and a body of water shimmers and sparkles in shades of blue never noticed before.

At the subconscious level, the memories of first love somehow super glue themselves to our psyches, becoming part of our very beings. We go through life unaware that we are even seeking to relive the intensity of emotion that accompanied our first love experience, but stealthily it drives

us. Like an addiction, once we experience the heady state of romantic love once, we chase that high for the rest of our lives.

What exactly happens to us when we are in love?

It isn't your imagination if you discover your palms sweating before a date with your love interest. And yes, your heart *is* really racing, too. You can thank the brain chemical, norepinephrine, for that. Science has identified certain "love" chemicals, such as oxytocin, dopamine, and phenethylamine, which jump into high gear in response to our racing hearts. Other physical responses include:

- ♥ Shortness of breath
- ♥ Dilating pupils
- ♥ Butterflies in your stomach
- ♥ Euphoria
- ♥ Flushed cheeks
- ♥ Light-headedness

And those are only the *physical* symptoms of being in love! The real craziness (they don't call it "madly in love" for nothing) is what happens to our sanity once struck by the love bug. Once rational human beings, we might find ourselves reduced to an obsessive love addict.

In fact, according to Frank Tallis, a clinical psychologist in London, there are similarities between the brain in love and the brain experiencing mental illness. Writes Tallis, "Neurochemical and brain scanning investigations have shown a considerable overlap between 'the brain in love' and 'the brain in the throes of mental illness.'" People who fall in love often exhibit symptoms that are associated with mental illness. Such symptoms include:

- ♥ Abnormally heightened self esteem and mood
- ♥ Preoccupation and obsession with the object of one's desires

- ♥ Uncontrollable passion
- ♥ Extreme possessiveness
- ♥ Jealousy
- ♥ Separation anxiety
- ♥ Mood swings

SO not a pretty picture, is it? All those brain chemicals and adrenaline are simply part of the love landscape and add to the intensity of the connection that is taking place between two human beings. We are literally biologically hard-wired to experience these emotions.

So is this true love, or is it lust?

The million-dollar question that lovers, for time immemorial, have asked is, “Is this true love?” Since such high stakes rest on the answer to that question, it is one worth pondering in those early, lusty days marked by infatuation (aka The Honeymoon Phase). So powerful are the driving forces of this phase, so highly emotionally pitched, that it is common for the couple to let important parts of their lives go. Their work, responsibilities, and friendships are often put on autopilot in favor of satisfying the brain’s reward system, which is wired to continue being stimulated by the paramour--reminiscent of a drug addiction. Lovers want to feel there will be long-term positive outcome if they are willing to risk everything for the relationship.

But here’s the problem: Love is a mystery. It just is. While some long-married couples’ brain scans show they still have the same brain activity that is present in the brains of new lovers, other couples’ love stories end suddenly and with a thud. What makes the difference? Although both started with the same pulsating passions, one has legs and the other is stopped in its tracks.

Those who have been blessed to find a true match made in heaven say it’s how they are treated that makes the difference. Feeling treasured by the other and treated with kindness and respect are specific traits that these lucky couples share, and which speak to love’s authenticity.

In reality, only time will bear out whether a couple is going to make it to the finish line. Much rests on whether the effort is made to keep romance alive and monotony at bay. If you find yourself in a relationship that suits you both, even if it is a quiet, comfortable relationship absent the sparks of earlier days, then you will be satisfied.

If, however, you have invested too much time in a relationship that not only feels as if something is missing, something is off, pay attention to your gut! The fireworks of first love that we all may be subliminally seeking could simply be a myth played out in our youth, but no one should have to settle for a dull, unfulfilling life with the wrong person. Life is fleeting. Let's not waste it by either looking for unrealistic signs of love or by accepting a lifeless facsimile of love.