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### How Do I Love Thee?

Early in a relationship we are firing on all cylinders. We are perfect partners, incredibly attentive listeners and in our partner's corner no matter what. We buy cards or flowers, we call each other constantly and do any number of other things to let our partner know how important he or she is. We are naturally overtaken by love and do all sorts of things outside our comfort zone in an effort to secure the partner we know is meant for us.

Of course, this intensity of feeling and action must be time-limited. How could we accomplish anything in our jobs, remember to buy groceries or take care of our kids if our focus remained forever fixed so on our partner? Yet there can certainly be sadness around this transition, captured in statements like "You don't bring me flowers anymore" or "You used to dress up for me; now you're always in sweatpants." Really, you would not want to go back to the start of your relationship again, with its accompanying anxiety and misunderstandings based on not knowing each other well yet. However, there is probably something you can point to that has stayed a part of your relationship and keeps you feeling loved, or something that has drifted and left a sense of something missing. This is likely your "love language."

A counselor and pastor Dr. Gary Chapman wrote a book called "The 5 Love Languages," asserting that each of us has a primary way we experience feeling loved, which is often the way we show love as well. When our partner's love language differs from our own, loving messages can get lost in translation. Think of when you have felt most loved: by your partner, in past relationships or by your parents. Think also about what makes your partner light up and how he or she seems to express love towards you. Which love languages come most naturally to you and your partner? One language is *physical touch*—You feel most loved through hugging, kissing, sex, or just being held close by your partner. A second language is *words of affirmation*—You light up when your partner tells you what he or she appreciates about you and validates who you are. Another is *gifts*—If this is your language, it is knowing that your partner was thinking of you and wanted to make an effort to please you that makes you feel loved, rather than how expensive or extravagant the gift is. *Acts of service* is a language where you feel loved when your partner goes out of his or her way to do something for you, to please you or take stress off your shoulders (like making a phone call you've been dreading, or washing dishes or recording your favorite show.) Last is *quality time*, where you feel most loved by having your partner's care and attention while talking together or sharing activities you enjoy.

We generally don't know how to ask for love in the way we need to receive it. (On the contrary, we often have a fantasy that our partner should just *know* what we need.) For some, it comes more naturally to ask their partner to speak their language while most of us feel something missing and tune into the anxiety this creates. Out of anxiety that our core need will not get met, we may lash out at our partner for the ways we perceive something is "wrong" with them. Surprisingly, this does not go well! You can't change your partner's natural love language any more than you could change your native language to Swahili. What you can do however is to be curious about how your partner feels loved and to start speaking this language. You may be surprised by how this can change the energy in your relationship and increase your partner's curiosity about what you find fulfilling. You or your partner are unlikely to suddenly develop a love of cleaning, or to truly enjoy spending time picking out a card, or to become "romantic" if this isn't naturally a part of who you are. However, one of the points I particularly like in Dr. Chapman's book is his assertion that "Love is a choice." We can choose to let our partner know us and learn to love us in the way that we need. We can choose to step beyond our natural inclinations to love our partner the way he or she needs to be loved.

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