



Cupid's Arrow Carries a Love Potion That Evaporates With Time

Love, like all emotions, changes and evolves over time. When they first “fall in love,” a couple feels euphoric. Their mutual fascination transforms their most trivial activities into meaningful moments. After one or two years, when the initial euphoria tapers off, couples usually settle into a deeper, more intimate relationship. Sometimes, however, when people sense the cool down, they fear their partner no longer loves them. Or, they may believe that the lessening of desire means they have fallen out of love with one another.

If a couple is not familiar with the normal course of love, they may run into difficulty. But if they recognize that the cooling of sexual passion is almost universal, they can prevent the next stage: a pattern of rejection, anger and resentment. Unfortunately many formerly loving relationships end when the dysfunctional pattern spreads to other levels.

As the magic wears off, one partner, usually (but not always) the man, feels rejected, angry and sexually frustrated. The other partner becomes angry at the constant demands, while feeling shameful and inadequate. The safest course can be a retreat into separate emotional or physical worlds. The retreat may even take the extreme course of having an affair to avoid confronting problems at home.

In our world, passion is a popular topic. We see it and hear about it everywhere. It is one of Hollywood's favorite tools. Yet until recently, little was known about the actual causes for the crazy, intense feelings that accompany new love. Certainly, we do not generally think of it as a scientific topic. It is useful to know that the euphoria of falling in love may stem from the temporary interaction of neurotransmitters in the brain. Phenylethylamine (PEA), an amphetamine-like neurotransmitter, combines with other biochemicals, including dopamine, to create the wild attraction between people falling in love. Later, when the PEA activity stops, Cupid's love potion dries up. Many couples feel lost without it.

In addition to a chemical change in brain activity, science also explains the biological gap between the sexes. For their libido, or sex drive, both males and females rely on the male hormone, testosterone. Women have a 10-times lower level of the hormone, making them more sensitive to its fluctuations. Once PEA levels drop, many women experience a sharper decrease in sexual desire than their male partners do. This discrepancy should not be a source of ridicule, shame or anger. Learning the scientific basis for their differences helps many couples accept one another, so they can begin to move out of the pattern of recrimination.

A cooling of the “in love” experience is different from loss of desire for other reasons. The former is universal: it is the nature of our biochemistry. The latter is not. A loss of desire for intimacy may stem from physiological factors including:

- fatigue,
- depression,

- aging,
- stress,
- illness or
- effect of drugs.

Psychological factors interfering with desire might include

- shame,
- sexual exploitation,
- abandonment,
- date rape,
- acquired attitudes about sex,
- bitter memories of a past love, or
- body image issues.

Body image problems often spring from constant exposure to media prototypes of “perfection,” and the insecurity they cause can seriously taint a relationship.

During the initial phase of falling in love, the PEA euphoria masks the deeper concerns of one’s inner world, such as loneliness, emptiness, or a lack of meaning in life. When a couple falls in love, every moment together is joyful. But once the haze lifts, inner issues erupt, affecting trust and sexual desire.

Loving relationships stem from both the inner and outer worlds, so exploring one, and not the other, does not work. Often a psychologist can help a couple examine and interconnect the two levels of their lives.

Generally, we speak easily about the events of our outer worlds: jobs, current events, and daily routines. But our inner worlds are vast, obscure and more difficult to discuss. After the first phase of love, we are again aware of the old feelings. Yet, we are unable to discuss them, fearing shame and vulnerability. We might not even understand our inner turmoil, let alone dare to speak openly about it.

Communicating about sexual feelings is even more difficult. In our world, sex is omnipresent, but how comfortably do most of us discuss sexuality and intimacy? And what vocabulary can we use? The strongest insults in our language have sexual connotations. Whether we want to mention a problem with intimacy or share a joyful moment, the lexicon of sex seems loaded with a coarseness that degrades the feeling.

A couple who have endlessly declared their attraction for one another may find it awkward or impossible to bring up their changing feelings and doubts.

In psychotherapy, people find the words they need to communicate constructively on this most sensitive topic, so they feel safe, heard and understood. They learn that their experience is neither unique nor shameful, and that they are not inadequate. Both men and women need to feel respected, listened to, and openly appreciated, a goal of successful psychotherapy. Once they appreciate their normal differences – and similarities- they will probably be able to manage the relationship more easily.

Despite feelings of vulnerability, a couple in counseling often feels safer exploring these issues, learning what each finds important and arriving at an appreciation of their differences. In their mutual acceptance, the couple can find an enduring form of love that is filled with desire, trust and respect. It should more than compensate for the loss of their early passionate relationship.

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