# Appendix: Love

A Brief Literature Review of the Nine Principles that Establish and Maintain Successful Families

#### Love

With all that has been written and said about love, it can be easily misunderstood. To be clear, love is a choice. Our love for others, including God, is manifested in what we choose to do and how we choose to spend our time. The feelings of love typically follow the actions of love and both are important. Marital researcher John Gottman described love as the emotions that bring people together to form a committed, lasting relationship (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). He and his wife explain three phases of love in a lifetime: falling in love, building trust, and building commitment and loyalty. Although Gottman and Gottman (2017) describe love as the emotions that draw people together, it is clear that they also understand the reality of choice in love, as choice is inherent in trust, commitment, and loyalty.

Building upon the idea that love helps draw people together, Galovan and colleagues (Galovan et al., 2024) reported that connection in marriage (being drawn together) is related more to intentional choices and effort than it is to spontaneous feelings of love. Specifically, the intentional effort of going on regular dates, spending time together, and performing regular acts of kindness, gratitude, and affection is more likely to be present among high-connection couples. It also appears that high-connection couples are more likely than their low-connection peers to possess the virtue of other-centeredness, which includes not being selfish (Galovan et al., 2024). This supports the idea that selfishness is the absence of love (Eyring, 2009).

Some believe that romantic love naturally evolves in marriage into something purely platonic (friendship without romance). Perhaps this happens for so many couples because maintaining romantic feelings in marriage takes significant effort, but it is possible to foster romantic feelings in the long term. Researchers have found that couples who participate regularly in novel and rewarding experiences together, have frequent sexual interactions and non-sexual physical affection, think positively about their spouse, and think about their spouse while they are apart are more inclined to report being intensely in love, even after years of marriage (O’Leary et al., 2012).

The basic idea of knowing a partner is another important component of love. Before and after marriage, it can be easy to presume that we know a person well, and we may. However, research suggests that love based on accurate and specific knowledge of a person is stronger than love based on more general ideas of a person (Neff & Karney, 2005). In marriage, we can lose specific knowledge of a partner over time if we are not intentional in getting to know our partner in an ongoing way (e.g., maintaining curiosity, regular and meaningful conversations, time spent together having different experiences, etc.). This happens because people change, knowing takes work, life is chaotic, and we don’t feel the need to learn more about our partner because we presume we already know enough. However, the process of learning about a spouse is an ongoing opportunity and blessing of marriage.

One way to facilitate a greater knowledge in marriage is to practice what psychologist Carl Rogers referred to as unconditional positive regard. Unconditional positive regard is the practice of viewing and treating people with acceptance and care, despite how they behave. As partners and parents do this, spouses and children become more likely to open up. The practice of unconditional positive regard can be very challenging in family relationships, but also a powerful instrument of love in both marriage and parenting. Spouses who demonstrate unconditional positive regard, as opposed to conditional positive regard, experience higher levels of relationship quality (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2012). Partners who experience conditional positive regard (a spouse provides acceptance, care, and affection only if certain expectations are met) report lower levels of relationship quality in part because they feel they are being controlled by love (Kanat‐Maymon et al., 2016). Children who have parents who demonstrate unconditional positive regard experience a host of benefits including higher intrinsic motivation (Roth et al., 2016), better psychological health (Rocha Lopes et al., 2015), better relationships with peers and parents, and more stable self-esteem (Haines & Schutte, 2022). Specifically, children with greater acceptance from their fathers are more likely to experience less psychopathology and problematic behavior. Children with greater maternal acceptance are more likely to experience better socioemotional development (Li & Meier, 2017). While it is okay for parents to disagree with the decisions of their children and they should certainly encourage healthy behavior, including establishing appropriate rules and expectations, parents can assist their children in their development by finding ways to accept them with love.

In family life, choosing intentional practices such as spending meaningful time with one another, getting to know each other, and having regular fun together are loving practices that help produce loving feelings. On the other hand, whenever we invest in marital and parental selfishness, we are likely to experience a decrease in our feelings of love. In marriage, people do not “fall” out of love. Rather, they make choices that decrease loving feelings. A couple can choose to stay in love throughout their marriage, but it takes work and intention.

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