

# The Mystery of Attraction

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"The type of human being we prefer reveals the contours of our heart."

- Jose Ortega y Gasset

When couples come to me for marital therapy, I usually ask them how they met. Maggie and Victor, a couple in their mid-fifties who were contemplating divorce after twenty-nine years of marriage, told me this story:

"We met in graduate school," Maggie recalled. "We were renting rooms in a big house with a shared kitchen. I was cooking breakfast when I looked up and saw this man—Victor—walk into the room. I had the strangest reaction. My legs wanted to carry me to him, but my head was telling me to stay away. The feelings were so strong that I felt faint and had to sit down."

Once Maggie recovered from shock, she introduced herself to Victor, and the two of them spent half the morning talking. "That was it," said Victor. "We were together every possible moment for the next two months, and then we eloped."

"If those had been more sexually liberated times," added Maggie, "I'm sure we would have been lovers from that very first week. I've never felt so intensely about anyone in my entire life."

Not all first encounters produce seismic shock waves. Rayna and Mark, a couple ten years younger, had a more tepid and prolonged courtship. They met through a mutual friend. Rayna asked a friend if she knew any single men, and her friend said she knew an interesting man named Mark who had recently separated from his wife. She hesitated to introduce him to Rayna, however, because she didn't think that they would be a good match. "He's very tall and you're short," the friend explained; "he's Protestant and you're Jewish; he's very quiet and you talk all the time." But Rayna said none of that mattered. "Besides," she said, "how bad could it be for one date?"

Against her better judgment, the friend invited Rayna and Mark to an election-night party in 1972. "I liked Mark right away," Rayna recalled. "He was interesting in a quiet sort of way. We spent the whole evening talking in the kitchen." Rayna laughed and then added, "I suspect that I did most of the talking."

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Rayna was certain that Mark was equally attracted to her, and she expected to hear from him the next day. But three weeks went by, and she didn't hear a word. Eventually she prompted her friend to find out if Mark was interested in her. With the friend's urging, Mark invited Rayna to the movies. That was the beginning of their courtship, but it was never a torrid romance. "We dated for a while, then we stopped for a while," said Mark. "Then we started dating again. Finally, in 1975, we got married."

"By the way," added Rayna, "Mark and I are still married, and the friend who didn't want to introduce us is now divorced."

These contrasting stories raise some interesting questions. Why do some people fall in love with such intensity, seemingly at first glance? Why do some couples ease into marriage with a level-headed friendship? And why, as in the case of Rayna and Mark, do so many couples seem to have opposite personality traits? When we have the answers to these questions, we will also have our first clues to the hidden psychological desires that underlie marriage.

### **Unraveling the Mystery of Romantic Attraction**

In recent years, scientists from various disciplines have labored to deepen our understanding of romantic love, and valuable insights have come from each area of research. Some biologists contend that there is a certain "bio-logic" to courtship behavior. According to this broad, **evolutionary view** of love, we instinctively select mates who will enhance the survival of the species. Men are drawn to classically beautiful women—ones with clear skin, bright eyes, shiny hair, good bone structure, red lips, and rosy cheeks—not because of fad or fashion but because these qualities indicate youth and robust health, signs that a woman is in the peak of her childbearing years.

Women select mates for slightly different biological reasons. Because youth and physical health aren't essential to the male reproductive role, women instinctively favor mates with pronounced "alpha" qualities, the ability to dominate other males and bring home more than their share of the kill. The assumption is that male dominance ensures the survival of the family group more than youth or beauty. Thus a fifty-year-old chairman of the board—the human equivalent of the silver-backed male gorilla—is as attractive to women as a young, handsome, virile, but less successful male.

If we can put aside, for a moment, our indignity at having our attractiveness to the opposite sex reduced to our breeding and food/money-gathering potential, there is some validity to this theory. Whether we like it or not, a woman's youth and physical appearance and a man's power and social status do play a role in mate selection, as a quick scan of the personal messages in the classified ads will attest: "Successful forty-five-year-old S.W.M. with private jet desires attractive, slim, twenty-year-old S.W.F.," and so on. But even though biological factors play a key role in our amorous advances, there's got to be more to love than this.

Let's move on to another field of study, social psychology, and explore what is known as the **“exchange” theory** of mate selection. The basic idea of the exchange theory is that we select mates who are more or less our equals. When we are on a search-and-find mission for a partner, we size each other up as coolly as business executives contemplating a merger, noting each other's physical appeal, financial status, and social rank, as well as various personality traits such as kindness, creativity, and a sense of humor. With computerlike speed, we tally up each other's scores, and if the numbers are roughly equivalent, the trading bell rings and the bidding begins.

The exchange theory gives us a more comprehensive view of mate selection than the simple biological model. It's not just youth, beauty, and social rank that interest us, say the social psychologists, but the whole person. For example, the fact that a woman is past her prime or that a man has a low-status job can be offset by the fact that he or she is a charming, intelligent, compassionate person.

**A third idea**, the “persona” theory, adds yet another dimension to the phenomenon of romantic attraction. The persona theory maintains that an important factor in mate selection is the way a potential suitor enhances our self-esteem. Each of us has a mask, a persona, which is the face that we show to other people. The persona theory suggests that we select a mate who will enhance this self-image. The operative question here is: “What will it do to my sense of self if I am seen with this person?” There appears to be some validity to this theory. We have all experienced some pride and perhaps some embarrassment because of the way we believe our mates are perceived by others; it does indeed matter to us what others think.

Although these three theories help explain some aspects of romantic love, we are still left with our original questions. What accounts for the intensity of romantic love—as in the case of Maggie and Victor—those feelings of ecstasy that can be so overpowering? And why—as in the case of Rayna and Mark—do so many couples have complementary traits?

In fact, the more deeply we look at the phenomenon of romantic attraction, the more incomplete these theories appear to be. For example, what accounts for the emotional devastation that frequently accompanies the breakup of a relationship, that deadly undertow of feelings that can drown us in anxiety and self-pity? One client said to me as his girlfriend was leaving him: “I can't sleep or eat. My chest feels like it's going to explode. I cry all the time, and I don't know what to do.” The theories of attraction we've looked at so far suggest that a more appropriate response to a failed romance would be simply to plunge into another round of mate selection.

There is another puzzling aspect of romantic attraction: we seem to have much more discriminating tastes than any of these theories would indicate. To see what I mean, take a moment to reflect on your own dating history. In your lifetime you have met thousands of people; as a conservative estimate, let's suppose that several hundred of them were physically attractive enough or successful enough to catch your eye. When we narrow this field by applying the social-exchange theory, we might come up with fifty or a hundred people out of this select group who would have a combined

“point value” equal to or greater than yours. Logically, you should have fallen in love with scores of people. Yet most people have been deeply attracted to only a few individuals. In fact, when I counsel single people, I hear again and again that “there just aren’t any good men (or women) out there!” The world is littered with their rejects.

Furthermore—and this is a curious fact—those few individuals that people are attracted to tend to resemble one another quite closely. Take a moment and think about the personality traits of the people that you have seriously considered as mates. If you were to make a list of their predominant personality traits, you would discover a lot of similarities, including, surprisingly, their negative traits.

From my vantage point as a marriage therapist, I see the unmistakable pattern in my clients’ choice of marriage partners. One night, in a group-therapy session, I was listening to a man who was three months into his second marriage. When his first marriage broke up, he had vowed to the group that he would never be involved with a woman like his first wife. He thought she was mean, grasping, and selfish. Yet he confessed during the session that the day before he had “heard” the voice of his ex-wife coming from the lips of his new partner. With a sense of panic he realized that the two women had nearly identical personalities. It appears that each one of us is compulsively searching for a mate with a very particular set of positive and negative personality traits.

### **Plumbing the Depths of the Unconscious Mind**

For this high degree of selectivity to make any sense, we need to understand the role that the unconscious mind plays in mate selection. In the post-Freudian era, most people have become quite adept at rummaging around in the unconscious for explanations of daily events. We talk knowledgeably about “Freudian slips,” analyze our dreams, and look for ways in which the unconscious might be influencing our daily behavior. Even so, most of us vastly underestimate the scope of the unconscious mind. There is an analogy that might give a better appreciation for its pervasive influence. In the daytime, we can’t see the stars. We talk as if they “come out” at night, even though they are there all the time. We also underestimate the sheer number of stars. We look up at the sky, see a smattering of dim stars, and assume that’s all there is. When we travel far away from city lights, we see a sky strewn with stars and are overwhelmed by the brilliance of the heavens. But it is only when we study astronomy that we learn the whole truth: the hundreds of thousands of stars that we see on a clear, moonless night in the country are only a fraction of the stars in the universe, and many of the points of light that we assume to be stars are in fact entire galaxies. So it is with the unconscious mind: the orderly, logical thoughts of our conscious mind are but a thin veil over the unconscious, which is active and functioning at all times.

Let’s take a brief look at the structure of the brain, that mysterious and complex organ with many different subdivisions. For simplicity’s sake, I like to use neuroscientist Paul McLean’s model and divide the brain into three concentric layers.

The brain stem, which is the inner and most primitive layer, is the part of the brain that oversees reproduction, self-preservation, and vital functions such as the circulation of blood, breathing, sleeping, and the contraction of muscles in response to external stimulation. Located at the base of the skull, this portion of the brain is sometimes referred to as the “reptilian brain,” because all vertebrates from reptiles to mammals share this portion of the anatomy. For the purpose of this discussion, let’s think of the brain stem as the source of physical action.

Flaring like a wishbone around the top of the brain stem is the portion of the brain called the limbic system, whose function seems to be the generation of vivid emotions. Scientists can surgically stimulate the limbic system of laboratory animals and create spontaneous outbursts of fear and aggression. In this book I use the term “old brain” to refer to the portion of the brain that includes both the brain stem and the limbic system. Think of the old brain as being hard-wired and determining most of your automatic reactions.

The final area of the brain is the cerebral cortex, a large, convoluted mass of brain tissue that surrounds the two inner sections and is itself divided into four regions or lobes. This portion of the brain, which is most highly developed in Homo sapiens, is the site of most of our cognitive functions. I refer to the cerebral cortex as the “new brain” because it appeared most recently in evolutionary history. Your new brain is the part of you that is conscious, alert, and in contact with your daily surroundings. It’s the part of you that makes decisions, thinks, observes, plans, anticipates, responds, organizes information, and creates ideas. The new brain is inherently logical and tries to find a cause for every effect and an effect for every cause. To a degree, it can moderate some of the instinctual reactions of your old brain. By and large, this analytical, probing, questioning part of your mind is that part that you think of as being “you.”

### **Old-Brain Logic**

In sharp contrast to the new brain, you are unaware of most of the functions of your old brain. Trying to comprehend this part of your being is a maddening task, because you have to turn your conscious mind around to examine its own underbelly. Scientists who have subjected the old brain to this kind of scrutiny tell us that its main concern is self-preservation. Ever on the alert, the old brain constantly asks the primeval question: “Is it safe?”

As it goes about its job of ensuring your safety, your old brain operates in a fundamentally different manner from your new brain. One of the crucial differences is that the old brain appears to have only a hazy awareness of the external world. Unlike the new brain, which relies on direct perception of outside phenomena, the old brain derives its incoming data from the images, symbols, and thoughts produced by the new brain. This reduces its data to very broad categories. For example, while your new brain easily distinguishes John from Suzy from Margaret, your old brain summarily lumps these people into six basic categories. The only thing your old brain seems to care about is whether a particular person is someone to: 1) nurture, 2) be nurtured by, 3) have sex with, 4) run away from, 5)

submit to, or 6) attack. Subtleties such as “this is my neighbor,” “my cousin,” “my mother,” or “my wife” slide right on by.

The old brain and the new brain, different in so many ways, are constantly exchanging and interpreting information. Here is how this takes place. Let’s suppose that you are alone in your house, and all of a sudden, person A walks through the door. Your new brain automatically creates an image of this creature and sends it to your old brain for scrutiny. The old brain receives the image and compares it with other, stored images. Instantly there is a first observation: “This humanoid is not a stranger.” Apparently encounters with this creature have been recorded before. A millisecond later there is a second observation: “There are no dangerous episodes associated with this image.” Out of all the interactions you have had with this mystery guest, none of them has been life-threatening. Then, rapidly, a third observation: “There have been numerous pleasurable episodes associated with this image.” In fact, the records seem to suggest that A is someone who is nurturing. Having reached this conclusion, the limbic system sends an all-clear signal to the reptilian brain, and you find yourself walking toward the intruder with open arms. Operating out of your new brain, you say, “Aunt Mary! What a pleasure to see you!”

All of this has taken place outside your awareness in only a fraction of a second. To your conscious mind, all that has happened is that your beloved Aunt Mary has walked in the door. Meanwhile, as you visit with your aunt, the data-gathering process continues. This latest encounter produces more thoughts, emotions, and images, which are sent to the limbic system to be stored in the part of the brain reserved for Aunt Mary. These new data will be a part of the information scanned by the old brain the next time she comes to visit.

Let’s look at a slightly different situation. Let’s suppose that the person who walked in the door was not Aunt Mary but her sister, Aunt Carol, and instead of greeting her with open arms, you found yourself resenting the interruption. Why such a different reaction to these two sisters? Let’s pretend that when you were eighteen months old you spent a week with Aunt Carol while your mother was in the hospital having another baby. Your parents, trying to prepare you in advance for this visit, explained to you that “Mommy is going bye-bye to the hospital to bring home a little brother or sister.” The words “hospital,” “brother,” and “sister” had no meaning to you, but “Mommy” and “bye-bye” certainly did. Whenever they mentioned those two words together, you felt anxious and sucked your thumb. Weeks later, when your mother went into labor, you were lifted out of your crib in a sound sleep and transported to Aunt Carol’s house. you woke up alone in a strange room, and the person who came to you when you cried was not your mother or father but Aunt Carol.

You dwelled in anxiety for the next few days. Even though Aunt Carol was loving and kind to you, you felt abandoned. This primal fear because associated with your aunt, and for years the sight of her or the smell of her perfume sent you running from the room. In later years you had many pleasurable or neutral experiences with Aunt Carol; nonetheless, thirty years later, when she walks into the room, you feel the urge to run away. It is only with great discipline that you rise to greet her.

## No Time Like the Present

This story illustrates an important principle about the old brain: it has no sense of linear time. Today, tomorrow, and yesterday do not exist; everything that was, still is. Understanding this basic fact about the nature of your unconscious may help explain why you sometimes have feelings within your marriage that seem alarmingly out of proportion to the events that triggered them. For example, imagine that you are a thirty-five-year-old woman, a lawyer in a prestigious firm. One day you are sitting in your office thinking warm, loving thoughts about your husband and decide to call him on the phone. You dial his number, and his secretary informs you that he is out of the office and can't be reached. Suddenly your loving thoughts vanish, and you feel a surge of anxiety: where is he? Your rational mind knows that he's probably calling on a client or enjoying a late lunch, but another part of you feels—let's be honest—abandoned. There you are, a sophisticated, capable woman, and just because your husband isn't available you feel as vulnerable as you did when your mother left you all day with an unfamiliar babysitter. Your old brain is locked in an archaic perspective.

Or let's suppose that you are a middle-aged man, a middle manager in a large company. After a hectic day at work, where you manage to placate important clients and put the finishing touches on a multimillion-dollar budget, you drive home, eager to share your successes with your wife. When you walk in the door, you see a note from your wife saying that she will be late coming home from work. You stop dead in your tracks. You had counted on her being there! Do you recover from the disappointment and relish the time to yourself? Do you use the time to do a final check on the budget? Yes. But not before you head straight for the freezer and consume two bowlfuls of bland, sweet vanilla ice cream, as close a substitute for mother's milk as you can possibly find. The past and the present live side by side within your mind.

Now that we've spent some time pondering the nature of the unconscious mind, let's return to our original discussion of mate selection. How does this information about the old brain add to our understanding of romantic attraction? The curious phenomenon I noted earlier in this exploration was that we seem to be highly selective in our choice of mates. In fact, we appear to be searching for a "one and only" with a very specific set of positive and negative traits.

What we are doing, I have discovered from years of theoretical research and clinical observation, is looking for someone who has the predominant character traits of the people who raised us. Our old brain, trapped in the eternal now and having only a dim awareness of the outside world, is trying to re-create the environment of childhood. And the reason the old brain is trying to resurrect the past is not a matter of habit or blind compulsion but of a compelling need to heal old childhood wounds.

The ultimate reason you fell in love with your mate, I am suggesting, is not that your mate was young and beautiful, had an impressive job, had a "point value" equal to yours, or had a kind disposition. **You fell in love because your old brain had your partner confused with your parents!** Your old brain believed that it had finally found the ideal candidate to make up for the psychological and emotional damage you experienced in childhood.