

The 3 Components of Love: Sternberg's Triangular Theory Explained

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What makes love last? Is it chemistry? Compatibility? Shared values?

While all of those certainly matter, psychologist Robert Sternberg offered another way to think about love that has become one of the most influential theories in relationship science. Rather than viewing love as a single feeling, Sternberg proposed that healthy romantic love is built from three essential components: **intimacy, passion, and commitment**. These three sides form what he called the *Triangular Theory of Love*.

The interesting part isn't that every healthy relationship has all three. It's that these three components **naturally rise and fall over time**. A couple celebrating their 30th anniversary won't experience love in exactly the same way they did during their honeymoon, and that's okay! Strong relationships don't rely on love staying the same. They allow for ebb and flow while continuing to nurture all three sides of the triangle through every season of life.

Let's take a closer look at each component and some simple, research-backed ways you can strengthen it in your own relationship.

Intimacy: Feeling Known, Safe, and Connected

When many people hear the word *intimacy*, they immediately think about physical intimacy, but Sternberg meant something much broader. In his theory, intimacy refers to emotional closeness—the feeling that your partner truly knows you, understands you, and accepts you. It's built through trust, vulnerability, affection, shared experiences, and genuine friendship.

This idea aligns closely with decades of research from Drs. John and Julie Gottman. After studying thousands of couples, the Gottmans found that strong marriages are built on a **deep friendship**. Happy couples continue learning about each other's inner worlds (dreams, worries, goals, and everyday experiences) rather than assuming they already know everything about one another.

Another hallmark of emotionally connected couples is something the Gottmans call "**turning toward**" **bids for connection**. A bid can be as simple as pointing out a beautiful sunset, sharing a funny story, asking for help, or mentioning a stressful day. Every time we respond with interest instead of distraction, we're making another small deposit into the relationship. Those moments may seem insignificant, but over time they become the foundation of emotional intimacy.

Ways to strengthen intimacy:

- Ask thoughtful questions instead of assuming you already know the answers.
- Spend at least 10–15 minutes each day talking without phones or other distractions.
- Share something you're *feeling*, not just something you're doing.
- Look for your partner's bids for connection and intentionally respond.
- Continue building your friendship by learning about each other's changing hopes, dreams, and experiences.

Passion: More Than Physical Attraction

Passion is often the easiest part of love to recognize, and the easiest to misunderstand. While physical attraction

and sexual desire are certainly part of passion, Sternberg described it more broadly as the motivational energy that creates excitement, romance, and attraction within a relationship.

Many couples worry when passion naturally changes over time. But research suggests this shift is completely normal. The butterflies of a new relationship eventually give way to something deeper and more secure. That doesn't mean passion has disappeared, it simply becomes less automatic and more intentional.

Fortunately, [research offers encouraging news](#). Studies have found that couples who engage in novel, exciting activities together often experience renewed closeness and attraction. Trying something new activates many of the same feelings of excitement that accompany falling in love.

The Gottmans also encourage couples to nurture what they call a [culture of appreciation](#). Regularly expressing admiration, noticing your partner's strengths, flirting, laughing together, and showing affection all help keep romance alive long after the honeymoon phase has passed.

Passion isn't sustained by chance. It's sustained by attention.

Ways to strengthen passion:

- Schedule [regular date nights](#)—even simple ones.
- Try a new activity together, such as hiking, dancing, cooking, or traveling somewhere unfamiliar.
- Be intentional about affectionate touch throughout the day.
- Express admiration and appreciation regularly.
- Make time for your sexual relationship, recognizing that [emotional closeness and physical intimacy](#) often reinforce one another.

Commitment: Love as a Daily Choice

Unlike intimacy and passion, commitment isn't primarily a feeling. According to Sternberg, commitment involves making the decision to love someone today AND continuing to invest in that relationship tomorrow.

Feelings naturally fluctuate. Life brings stress, illness, parenting, financial pressures, and disappointment. Commitment provides stability during seasons when emotions alone aren't enough. Healthy commitment isn't

simply staying together; it means actively protecting the relationship through trust, teamwork, and intentional effort.

One of the Gottmans' best-known findings is that conflict itself isn't what predicts divorce. Instead, it's *how* couples handle conflict that matters. Couples who [repair disagreements](#) with humor, affection, accountability, or genuine attempts to reconnect are much more likely to maintain strong relationships over time. Likewise, approaching problems with a "we're on the same team" mindset helps couples face challenges together rather than turning against one another.

Commitment isn't about pretending everything is fine. It's about continuing to choose the relationship, especially when life gets hard.

Ways to strengthen commitment:

- Talk regularly about your shared goals and future.
- Make decisions that communicate, "We're on the same team."
- Follow through on promises, even small ones.
- Practice repairing conflict instead of trying to "win."
- Create rituals of connection, such as weekly date nights, evening walks, or Sunday planning meetings.

The Strongest Relationships Need All Three

One of the most fascinating parts of Sternberg's theory is that different combinations of intimacy, passion, and commitment create different kinds of relationships.

For example, intimacy without commitment may describe a close friendship. Passion without intimacy may feel like infatuation. Commitment without emotional closeness can become an empty partnership.

The healthiest romantic relationships strive toward what Sternberg called consummate love—a relationship where intimacy, passion, and commitment are all present. Importantly, he never suggested that this is a permanent destination. Instead, he viewed love as something that requires continual attention because each component naturally changes throughout life.

That's encouraging news. You don't have to wonder whether you've "fallen out of love." Instead, ask a different question: **Which side of our triangle could use a little attention right now?** Maybe it's reconnecting emotionally after a busy season. Maybe it's [bringing back fun](#) and

romance. Maybe it's recommitting to the habits that help you face life as partners.

Healthy marriages aren't built on one perfect feeling. They're built by intentionally strengthening all three sides of love, one conversation, one date night, one repair attempt, and one small choice at a time.