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## The Building Blocks of Love: Co-Creating a Happy Relationship

By Carista Lumiere and Lion Goodman

**Most of us are somewhat confused about love.**

We yearn for love, and we need love. But what does healthy love look like? And how can we create it?

Our confusion leads to all sorts of unconscious and irrational behavior, uncomfortable feelings, and reactivity in our relationships. It can impact our ability to make or keep commitments. It can result in anxiety or withdrawal, even abandonment and betrayal. Confusion about love creates a lot of unhappiness.

What we yearn for is something very particular. It's often missing in our closest relationships. **We've wanted this simple feeling since we were born: it's the feeling of secure, dependable love.**

**Deep inside, you know how love *ought to feel*.** Infants innately know what love feels like: an upset baby gets picked up, held close to her mother's or father's body, and soothed with gentle touch, a soft voice, and eyes that are warm and caring. We have a neurological need to be comforted in this safe and tender way. To the infant, this feeling *is* love.

When children get this kind of safety and predictable care, they form a *secure attachment bond* with their primary caregiver. When they don't, they develop what the psychological literature calls "adverse developmental effects."

This field of research, called *attachment theory*, grew out of hundreds of studies beginning in the 1950's with pioneers such as John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and many others. In the past decade, the field has been popularized and brought into practical application by Sue Johnson (*Hold Me Tight*), Stan Tatkin (*Wired for Love*), Dan Siegel (*Parenting from the Inside Out*), and others. These clinicians and researchers have shown how our childhood bonding pattern extends into, and shapes, our adult relationships.

What has become clear, through decades of research on attachment in both children and adults, is that **we never outgrow this need to feel safe and secure in our relationships**. We are designed to be deeply connected to someone we trust. All of us, whether infant, child, or adult, want to have our needs and feelings heard, and cared for, by someone who makes us a priority.

We've found that many of the most mindful, conscious, and personally transformed people we know still have significant problems in their primary relationship. Mindfulness practices do not, apparently, automatically transform an individual's ability to interact lovingly with their romantic partner. When we get triggered, mindful centeredness flies right out the window.

The ability to self-regulate is a crucial life skill, yet relationships require co-regulation, which is a different skill altogether. Living alone is one solution – there’s no one around to trigger you. Couples and families, on the other hand, are forced into close quarters with others who can easily feel like threats to their vulnerable primitives. You can “pet your lizard” to soothe your primitive brain and quiet your fears, but what do you do when your partner’s lizard brain feels cornered, and attacks?

Our exploration and work are centered on these issues. We’ve taken attachment theory and combined it with our understanding of prenatal psychology, trauma healing, and spiritual transformation. We call the resulting comprehensive patterns *LoveStyles*, and the commitment to rewire each other toward secure relationship the *Healing LoveStyle*.

## The Landmines of Our Inner Landscape

We each have reactive landmines planted deep in our subconscious mind, and our partner’s behavior can easily trigger them. If you sense a potential threat (such as your spouse getting upset or angry with you), your amygdala might shift from feeling safe and secure (the “green zone”) into the highly alert and cautious state (the “yellow zone”). The landmine is now armed – it is hypersensitive to any additional threat. Any small slight, such as a false accusation or an unkind word, can trip it. When that happens, your neurology goes reactive. Real danger requires an immediate response. Your amygdala enters the red “Danger! zone” and you may snap into behaviors that you’ll feel embarrassed by, or regret, later. Your primitive brain has hijacked your ability to practice mindfulness. In fact, you’ve “lost your mind” – or at least your ability to consciously self-regulate.

In an ideal world, at moments like this, you can depend on your partner to provide you with reassurance and care. *“It’s okay, honey. You’re safe, I’m here, and I’ve got you. Come on over here and get a big hug.”* This soothes your frightened inner child, and your amygdala can de-escalate and relax. Safely embraced, your limbic system quiets from emergency red to cautious yellow, and eventually it settles back into the calm green zone of safety. *“It’s okay, the danger has passed. I’m loved.”*

Rick Hanson points out in *Hardwiring Happiness* that **we have three fundamental needs: 1) to feel safe, 2) to feel fulfilled, and 3) to feel connected in a reliable way.** To create a secure love bond, you need all three experiences from your partner. We call them the “Three Prime Directives” of relationship.

## Flourishing in the Green Zone

Like children who have supportive and loving parents, we flourish when we’re held securely by our primary love source. Senior citizens who stay married live longer than singles seniors, and interviews with seniors who have been married for decades show that in general, they live happier lives, and are more content, than those who live alone. This data suggests that we are at our best when we’re rooted in a reliable, loving, long-term relationship.

This kind of secure, co-regulating relationship doesn’t have to be romantic or sexual. Sustainable mutual support can be developed with a friend or family member. Couples who are fortunate enough to have both – deep trust and deep passion – are especially blessed.

This may be striking news for high achievers and spiritual seekers who believe that their independence and self-sufficiency are among their greatest strengths. At our core, we are relational creatures. Like other troop animals, we need others around us to feel safe, and to be safe. Many people who avoid

intimacy are doing so as a result of their early childhood bonding pattern, where they felt insecure in their connection with their caregivers, rather than feeling more secure.

We've been socialized into believing that being independent means being mature. More than half of adults in America are single, and one out of seven live alone. This accounts for 28% of all households in the U.S., and more than 40% in some cities.<sup>[3]</sup> It's a grand social experiment, and we don't yet know the consequences. What we do know is there is a lot of unhappiness among singles, and also among couples who don't feel secure in their relationship.

## The Essential Nature of Love

The essential nature of healthy love is simple: it is generous, reliable and caring. It feels like a nourishing connection you can rest in. You feel comfortable revealing your deepest needs and your highest aspirations. You know you can expose your True Self, including your fears and your magnificence. The message your body-mind feels is, *"I trust that you care for all of me."*

When two people commit to creating an enduring, long-term relationship, and to being co-regulation partners, a deep hunger is satisfied. Each person makes their partner's well being a top priority. The feeling of being solidly connected to another person changes the brain. Something settles within us. We feel that we're home, protected from the dangers of the world. We call this the *Healing LoveStyle*.

There is a simple science, and a practical art, to experiencing this kind of dependable and passionate love – both in and out of the bedroom. It's possible to rewire the two brains in a relationship from insecure attachment to secure love. It only requires that both people share the goal, and commit to practicing care for the other's three primary needs: safety, contentment and style of connection.

Since we all have conditioning from the past (our "landmines"), both partners also commit to healing and re-wiring their reactive patterns over time, together as a team. The results are more than worth the effort. They include mutual security, rich passion, and expanding joy. And for those who desire it, more and better sex.

We've seen swift and radical improvements whenever two people make this commitment to rewiring toward secure attachment. It's never too late to begin.

## The Building Blocks of Love

It's nearly impossible to build a solid relationship on the shaky foundation of anxiety or fear. The building blocks of love provide a solid foundation to build a healthy, happy, and sustainable relationship.

**First, get to know your LoveStyle.** Your childhood attachment style, or bonding pattern, was formed out of your early experience with your parents (or primary caregivers). You developed strategies to deal with the presence, or absence, of love and care. These strategies were later reinforced, or modified, through your other relationships – with family members, friends, lovers, and others. In a broad sense, we call this your LoveStyle. When you examine your pattern and deepen your understanding of the various styles, you can grow beyond the one you inherited or adopted.

We can easily observe that children express their natural exuberance, enthusiasm, and joyful creativity when they feel safe and secure. When something frightens a child, her limbic fire alarm goes off. She runs back to Mom, seeking safety and immediate attention. If she gets picked up, held, and comforted, her limbic system quiets. She relaxes back into a comfortable “*I’m safe*” state, and she can return to her play. This optimal mother-child bond builds the child’s ability to feel safe in herself, and she grows in her ability to self-regulate and become more independent.

This vital transmission from parent to child enhances a child’s intelligence, health, and self-worth. When sustained over time, the *Secure LoveStyle* is formed. Adults with this style are usually stable in their relationships, and they make and keep close relationships easily and for the long term. They are great friends to have!

## The Insecure LoveStyles

Unfortunately, few of us got secure love consistently. Your parents taught you, by how they treated you, what love *is*, and what love *feels like*. It’s likely that they were never trained in ideal parenting skills. Their parents didn’t show *them* what healthy love looks like, either. Most parents have a pile of difficulties to deal with: a household to manage, one or two jobs, other children to care for, exhaustion and overwhelm, and a less-than-perfect marriage. Your parents weren’t able to offer you the safe harbor you needed.

If either of your parents were absent much of the time, you may have learned that love feels like rejection or abandonment. If they were busy, you may have learned that love feels erratic, and unpredictable: “Love” is that anxious feeling. If you couldn’t count on anyone to care for you, you may have withdrawn into yourself and learned to become self-sufficient.

This wide range of bonding patterns and strategies are collectively called “insecure attachment.” And of course, most people seek out adult partners that make them feel “just like home,” so attachment patterns commonly get repeated, over and over, in our adult relationships.

Insecurely attached children form strategies for dealing with the uncomfortable feelings produced by the lack of safety and consistent care. **For some, the strategy is focused outward, on the caregiver:** “*Do you love me? Will my needs be met? What do I have to do to get cared for?*” We call this the *Insecure-Anxious LoveStyle*.

Adults with this style often pursue their partner to get the connection and love they need. They can escalate in tone or energy when triggered, and demand to have their needs attended to. They may get aggressive or even punishing with words or actions if they don’t get what they want.

**Other children develop an inward-focused strategy:** “*I can’t count on anyone else. I’ll just take care of myself.*” This forms what we term the *Insecure-Avoidant LoveStyle*. Adults with this style withdraw from conflict when things go badly. They may go into their head, or dive into their work, or leave to be alone to center themselves. Their chief complaint is often that their partner doesn’t listen to or value their feelings or thoughts. They may feel invaded or overwhelmed by the anxiety of their partner.

People of this type can find it easier to be alone than in a relationship. They are highly self-sufficient, and enjoy time alone. Their best relationship may be with God, or a pet, or with their work. Our society rewards people of this type, who don’t mind working long hours, and don’t need much supervision.

**Some children suffer from emotional or physical neglect, abandonment or abuse.** If these psychological wounds are left untreated and unhealed, they may grow into adults who unconsciously re-create traumatic dynamics with their partners. The result may be vicious fighting or processing cycles that never seem to resolve. We call this the *Traumatic LoveStyle*. Others call it Traumatic Attachment. People with this style usually require professional support to heal.

**Many of us are hybrids, having tendencies or traits of two or more LoveStyles.** (With two different parents, it's likely that we learned two different strategies.) Our LoveStyle patterns often get expressed in our other relationships: with our children, our friends, and even our professional colleagues. When your LoveStyle clashes with another person's LoveStyle, you may find that you're unusually reactive in their presence.

Combining all of these factors, we have a perfect formula for chaos and unhappiness in our primary relationship. No wonder we're so confused about love! If this resonates with you, just remember: you're part of a very large club, called the human race.

### **How We Can Heal Each Other**

All of us have subconscious, unhealed patterns that hijack us unexpectedly from time to time. We can't expect perfection from ourselves or from each other. Over time, our brains can rewire toward healthy, secure bonding. All it takes is a partner who also wants to create healthy love. The goal is to move from "mostly insecure" to "mostly secure" love. Attachment specialists consider "secure" to mean *80% or more* positive interactions that keep the limbic system in the green zone.

When two people intentionally choose to transition from insecure to secure bonding, and commit to creating a healthy relationship together, they are engaging in what we call the *Healing LoveStyle*. **There are four essential steps to learn and practice:**

1. Learn to understand and self-manage your own limbic triggers.
2. Learn to communicate your true needs, in real time, as best as you can.
3. Commit to care for their partner's needs (and limbic system) with equal regard.
4. Behaviors that cause insecurity are seen as opportunities to help each other practice secure bonding.

Consistent practice can eventually shift your brain toward secure attachment. This is a relationship mindfulness practice. We've learned from our work with couples that predictable love creates the happiness we longed for as children, and continue to long for. As adults, we can create it consciously.

### **Practice Loving Your Partner *Their* Way**

Each LoveStyle type has a particular way they prefer to be loved. Learning to soothe your partner's limbic system is the single best way we've found to renew and sustain love.

In general, this is what people with each LoveStyle need from their partner:

**Secure types**, who are confident in their love, need less reassurance than Insecure types. They feel at ease with giving and receiving love in real time. Like everyone else, they need positive interactions that remind them that they are loved, appreciated, and cherished.

**Insecure-Anxious types** often feel fearful and uncertain. They're afraid of being abandoned. They need consistent connection and reassurance from their partner. If their partner needs space, they need to know when they can expect to be re-connected. Their partner informs them, *"I'm going to take a walk so I can re-center myself. I'll be back in 15 minutes."*

**Insecure-Avoidant types** often fear being flooded or invaded, so they need space, understanding, and patience from their partner. If their partner sees them getting overwhelmed, they can say, *"Take the time you need to integrate that, and then let's re-connect."*

**Insecure-Traumatized types** fear a repeat of their original trauma, and they trigger easily when something mimics their traumatic past. They need lots of reassurance that they are safe, and that this moment is not like their past. Their partner says, *"I'm here with you now, and I'm not going away. You're safe, and I love you. This is now. It's not the past."*

When you understand the specific "love requirements" of your partner, you can offer them what they need (rather than what you need). This creates a foundation of security you can both count on. When you feel comfortable communicating your needs to one another, knowing you will be cared for, your limbic system is quiet, and your heart can open.

## **The Sex Discussion**

Secure love is also an important foundation for hot sex! When you feel anxious, insecure, or afraid, it's almost impossible to feel turned on – or be open to desire (your own, or your partner's). An amygdala in the red zone shuts down the flow of passion. Both romantic love and sexual love are tied to our feelings of safety, trust and being cared for. Care is a great sensual lubricant. Add a dash of feeling cherished, and sparks will fly. Feeling sexually inspired and fulfilled is a natural outcome of the care we express for each other.

As we mature, physical and emotional safety becomes more important to our sexuality than the raging hormones of our youth. When we feel protected, we can let down our guard and be vulnerable. We open to the flow of love. Intimacy and sex are best when both partners feel playful and affectionate. It's the kind of sex we all want, and it comes when we can let go of our defenses and be totally present with our partner.

## **Extending the Happiness**

Co-creating happiness and intimacy with your partner requires mindfulness, wisdom, and practice. Rewiring your brain for secure relationship takes time – and it's more than worth the investment.

Now imagine extending this practice to everyone in your life, whether they are a lover, a child, a colleague, or a stranger. If we commit to care for the primal part of the brains of others, and we embrace them with our love, we offer them an oasis in the desert of life. This creates peace and happiness in those we meet. Let us learn to do so – and practice, practice, practice.