



With soaring divorce rates and more single households than ever before, perhaps it's time to rethink our approach to finding love, says Dr Robert Epstein

*Photographs by Craig Fordham*

Q&A  
CAN YOU  
LEARN TO  
LOVE ANYONE?



*Dr Robert Epstein is a visiting scholar at the University of California, San Diego.*

*For more information on his work, visit [www.drrobertepstein.com](http://www.drrobertepstein.com)*

**Q What do you believe is fundamentally wrong with the way we approach love?**

For most Westerners, our relationships are the one area of our lives that we are happy to leave entirely to chance. We plan our education, our careers, our finances, our retirement, but we're still uncomfortable with the idea that we should plan our love lives. Yet, for many centuries, romantic love was viewed as a form of madness, and passion wasn't considered a legitimate basis for marriage until recent times.

**Q So why do we place such an emphasis on passion?**

The problem starts with fairy tales. They foster some very resilient myths. The myth of happily ever after, for example, creates expectations about what's supposed to happen in a relationship – expectations that are virtually impossible to meet. The myth of The One is another very destructive fallacy. We believe The One is out there for us, if only we can find him or her. We think once we find The One, he or she will never change, and neither will we.

**Q How do these myths affect us?**

They influence how we select a partner. If you think you love someone right away, you're in love with an idealised version of the person, or, like Shakespeare's Duke Orsino, you're just 'in love with love'. The fairy tales encourage us to look for the lightning bolt, but relationships based on this kind of phenomenon almost always end in tatters – historically, this kind of instantaneous ▷

## THE SEVEN ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

*Dr Epstein's research, conducted with colleagues Regina Warfel and James Johnson, shows that seven basic skills are essential for building happiness in long-term love relationships. 'No matter what your personality, or the state of your relationship, improving these skills will help your relationship work better,' he says.*



### 1 COMMUNICATION

This category involves critically important skills: knowing how to listen, sharing your thoughts and feelings honestly, refraining from criticising and encouraging your partner to share his or her feelings.

### 2 CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict-resolution skills include techniques such as staying focused on the topic, staying focused on the present, being ready to forgive or apologise, knowing when to take a break.

### 3 KNOWLEDGE OF PARTNER

What's his shirt size? What's his favourite food? After communication, simply knowing a lot about your partner is a powerful way of showing that you care, and makes you better equipped to tend to his or her ongoing needs.

### 4 LIFE SKILLS

Do you plan for emergencies? Do you exercise and stay fit? Studies show that people usually want their partners to contribute a degree of security

to a long-term relationship. People also want their partners to take good care of themselves.

### 5 SELF-MANAGEMENT

This is not the same as life skills, Epstein insists. People who are skilled at self-management take inventories of their strengths and weaknesses and always strive for improvement. They know how to interpret disturbing events in positive ways and they work hard to reach their goals.

### 6 SEX AND ROMANCE

People with strong skills in these areas enquire and care about how to please their partner sexually, set aside time for intimacy, refrain from blaming their partner when sex doesn't go smoothly, and try to stay physically attractive for their partner.

### 7 STRESS MANAGEMENT

Do you know how to use breathing, meditation, or imagery techniques to help you fight stress? If you know how to avoid or fight stress, you'll be better able to love and support your partner.



people around us with whom we could very deliberately create lasting love. Two people need to be basically compatible and at least somewhat attracted to each other. Given these basic requirements – which each of us shares, most likely, with thousands of other people – two people can learn to love if, first, they make a strong commitment to do so, second, they agree not to date other people while they are developing their relationship, and third, they engage in various love-promoting activities (such as reading about love) to develop openness and fondness for one another.

**Q Surely it's not as easy as simply widening the field of suitable people?**

No, certainly not. We also need to think about whether we believe that love is a magical, mystical thing over which we have no control, or whether there are skills we can learn that will help us. Recent studies in Mexico, Italy and the UK are revealing neurological and chemical correlates of the love state; mental health professionals have developed powerful tools for fostering love, and researchers are getting better at predicting success in relationships. The biggest myth of all about love is that it can't be studied scientifically.

**Q Doesn't your method make falling in love a calculated commodity? Isn't this a more prosaic alternative to 'real' love?**

Passionate love is already a commodity, sold to us by film-makers, novelists and songwriters. Unfortunately, it's sold to us in a form that is both unrealistic and inaccessible to most people. I'm proposing that we put romantic love on a steadier footing. It's depressing to think that 'real' love has to choose you. I'm too much of an optimist to leave any form of happiness to chance. ■

◁ bond was seen as a kind of madness. Also, when our expectations are violated – when our partner cheats or gains weight or stops sleeping with us – we get depressed or angry. We rarely put in the effort needed to keep things going.

**Q So, if we accept that our current model for finding love doesn't work, is there another model that does?**

Sixty per cent of the world's marriages are arranged by matchmakers or parents, and in perhaps half of these marriages, people learn to love each other over time. A study conducted in India in the 1980s compared the strength of feelings of partners in love matches to those of partners in arranged marriages. The 'love' in love matches started to fade after about two years, but the love in the arranged marriages grew gradually, surpassing the love in the love marriages at about the five-year mark. Ten years on, the love in the arranged marriages was twice as strong.

**Q But what about sexual attraction?**

Physical attraction is important, especially early on in a relationship.

But it's also important to know how to distinguish lust from love. When physical attraction is too strong, it can be blinding, and many people who think they are in love are actually just in lust.

**Q Do you think we should practise arranged marriage in the West?**

No, not at all – but it is possible for us to take control of our love lives. We needn't leave love entirely to chance. We used to leave our relaxation and peace of mind entirely to chance, but then we learned to package Asian relaxation techniques to suit our own needs. I believe we can do the same with the process of learning to love.

**Q How do we begin to take control over our love lives?**

First, we need to accept that there is no one 'right' partner predestined for us. The soulmate myth is rubbish, and harmful. We need to look around us with new eyes, new assumptions and new skills.

**Q So we can learn to love anyone?**

I don't believe you can fall in love with absolutely anyone, but there are many