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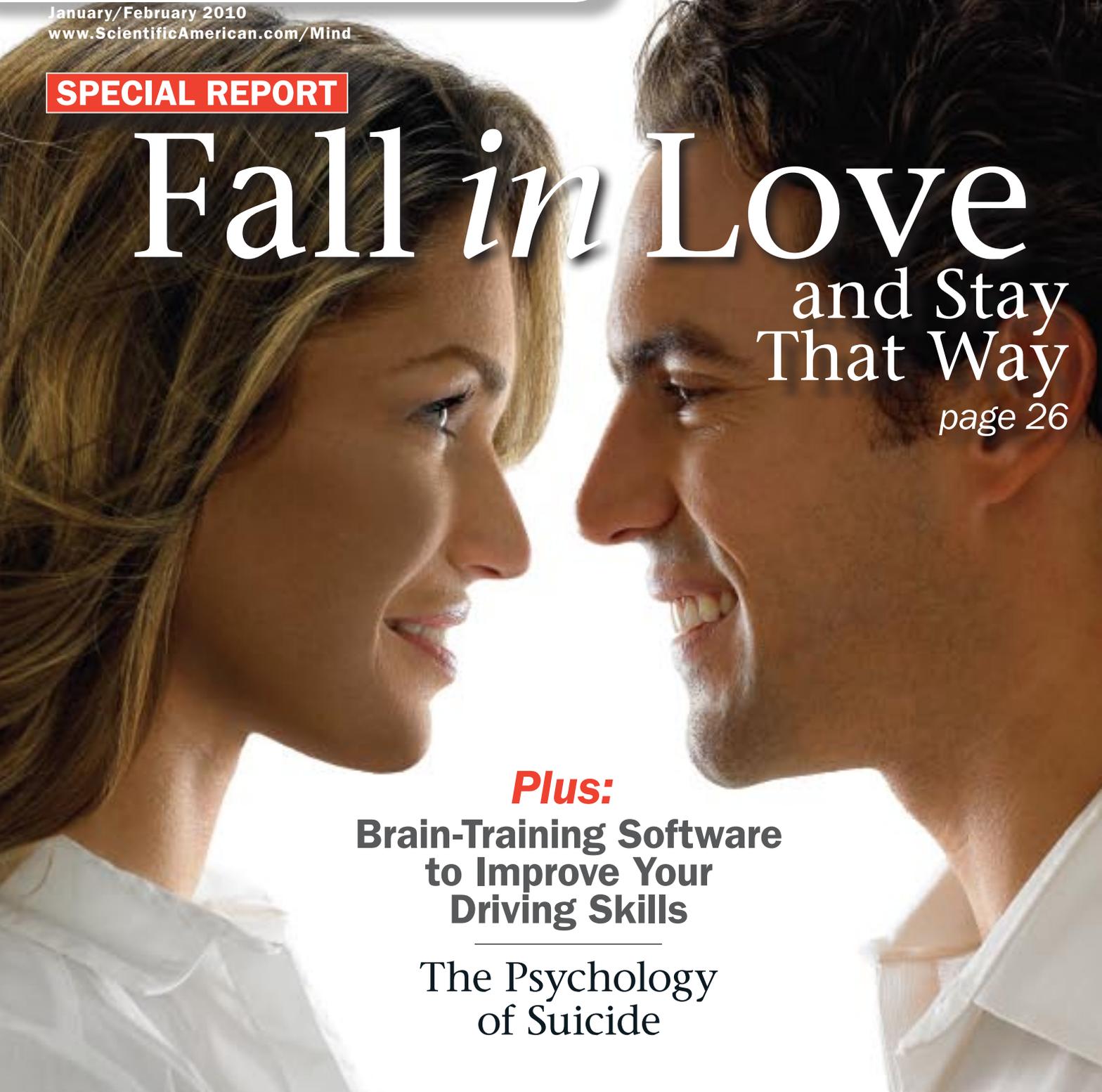
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How **Science** Can Help You



Fall in Love

Nothing is more fulfilling than being in a successful love relationship. Yet we leave our love lives entirely to chance. Maybe we don't have to anymore **By Robert Epstein**

The best way to get students interested in scientific studies is to give them hands-on experiences that get them excited about the subject matter. In chemistry courses, teachers accomplish that with test tubes and mysterious liquids. In a course I taught recently at the University of California, San Diego, on relationship science, I piqued my students' interest with exercises on, well, *love*.

B2M PRODUCTIONS/GETTY IMAGES (left);
PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY AARON GOODMAN (right)







The researchers found that mutual eye gazing (but not gazing at hands) produced rapid increases in feelings of both liking and loving in total strangers.

To begin, I invited eight students who did not know each other to come to the front of the auditorium, where I paired them up randomly. I then asked each individual to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10,

how much he or she liked, loved, or felt close to his or her partner. Then I asked the couples to look deeply into each other's eyes in an exercise I call Soul Gazing.

There was some giggling at first and then some very intense gazing. After two minutes, I again asked for the numbers. The result? A modest 7 percent increase in loving (meaning 1 point added for one person in one couple), an 11 percent increase in liking, and a whopping 45 percent increase in closeness. There were gasps and cheers in the audience. When I asked everyone in the class to pair up for two minutes of gazing, 89 percent of the students said the exercise increased feelings of intimacy.

And that was just the beginning...

Eye Contact

About 50 percent of first marriages fail in the U.S., as do two thirds of second marriages and three quarters of third marriages. So much for practice! We fail in large part because we enter into relationships with poor skills for maintaining them and highly unrealistic expectations. We also tend to pick unsuitable partners, mistakenly believing that we are in love simply because we feel physical attraction.

That combination of factors sets us up for fail-

FAST FACTS

Lessons on Love

1» About half of first marriages fail in the U.S., as do two thirds of second marriages and three quarters of third marriages. We fail in large part because we enter into relationships with poor skills for maintaining them and highly unrealistic expectations.

2» The fix for our poor performance in romantic relationships: extract a practical technology from scientific research on how people learn to love each other—and then teach individuals how to use it.

3» A study of arranged marriages in which love has grown over time hints that commitment, communication, accommodation and vulnerability are key components of a successful relationship. Other research indicates that sharing adventures, secrets, personal space and jokes can also build intimacy and love with your partner.

Love-Building Exercises

Here are some fun exercises, all inspired by scientific studies, that you can use to deliberately create emotional intimacy with a partner—even someone you barely know:

1 Two as One. Embracing each other gently, begin to sense your partner's breathing and gradually try to synchronize your breathing with his or hers. After a few minutes, you might feel that the two of you have merged.

2 Soul Gazing. Standing or sitting about two feet away from each other, look deeply into each other's eyes, trying to look into the very core of your beings. Do this for about two minutes and then talk about what you saw.

3 Monkey Love. Standing or sitting fairly near each other, start moving your hands, arms and legs any way you like—but in a fashion that perfectly imitates your partner. This is fun but also challenging. You will both feel as if you are moving voluntarily, but your actions

are also linked to those of your partner.

4 Falling in Love. This is a trust exercise, one of many that increase mutual feelings of vulnerability. From a standing position, simply let yourself fall backward into the arms of your partner. Then trade places. Repeat several times and then talk about your feelings. Strangers who do this exercise sometimes feel connected to each other for years.

5 Secret Swap. Write down a deep secret and have your partner do the same. Then trade papers and talk about what you read. You can continue this process until you have run out of secrets. Better yet, save some of your secrets for another day.

6 Mind-Reading Game. Write down a thought that you want to convey to your partner. Then spend a few minutes wordlessly trying to broadcast that thought to him or her, as he or she tries to guess what it is. If he or she cannot guess, reveal what you were thinking. Then switch roles.



7 Let Me Inside. Stand about four feet away from each other and focus on each other. Every 10 seconds or so move a bit closer until, after several shifts, you are well inside each other's personal space (the boundary is about 18 inches). Get as close as you can without touching. (My students tell me this exercise often ends with kissing.)

8 Love Aura. Place the palm of your hand as close as possible to your partner's palm without actually touching. Do this for several minutes, during which you will feel not only heat but also, sometimes, eerie kinds of sparks. —R.E.

ure: eventually—often within a mere 18 months—the fog of passion dissipates, and we begin to see our partner with new clarity. All too often we react by saying, “Who are *you*?” or “You’ve *changed*.” We might try hard for years after that to keep things going, especially if children are in the picture. But if we start out with the wrong person and lack basic tools for resolving conflicts and communicating, the chances that we will succeed are slim to none.

Over the years, having looked carefully at the fast-growing scientific literature on relationship science and having conducted some new research of my own, I have come to believe that there is a definite fix for our poor performance in romantic relationships. The fix is to extract a practical technology from the research and then to teach people how to use it.

At least 80 scientific studies help to reveal how people learn to love each other. A 1989 study by psychologist James D. Laird of Clark University and his colleagues inspired my Soul Gazing exercise. The researchers showed that mutual eye gazing (but not gazing at hands) produced rapid increases in feelings of both liking and loving in total strangers. Mutual gazing is like staring, but with an important differ-

ence: for many mammalian species, staring is both intended and received as a threat. Try it on a New York subway if you have any doubts about its efficacy. In mutual gazing, however, people are giving each other *permission* to stare; that is, they are being *vulnerable* to each other, and that is the key element in emotional bonding. The vulnerability created when people are in war zones can create powerful emotional bonds in seconds, and even hostages sometimes develop strong attachments to their captors, a phenomenon called the Stockholm syndrome.

Signs of vulnerability in an animal or another person bring out tendencies in many people to provide care and protection—to be drawn to that being and to like or even love him or her. And as research

(The Author)

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“I noticed a drastic change in our bond for one another,” one student wrote. “My husband seems more affectionate now than he was, for which I am really grateful.”

in social psychology has shown for decades, when a person is feeling vulnerable and thus agitated or otherwise aroused, he or she often looks around for clues about how to interpret and label those feelings. The body is saying, “I’m aroused, but I’m not sure why,” and the environment is suggesting an answer, namely, that you’re in love.

A Technology of Affection

Soul Gazing is one of dozens of exercises I have distilled from scientific studies that make people feel vulnerable and increase intimacy. Love Aura, Let Me Inside and Secret Swap are other examples of fun, bond-building activities that any couple can learn and practice [see box on preceding page].

Students could earn extra credit in my course by trying out such techniques with friends, romantic interests or even total strangers. More than 90 percent of the students in the course reported using these methods successfully to improve their relationships, and more than 50 of the 213 students submitted detailed reports about their experiences. Nearly all the

reports documented increases in liking, loving, closeness or attraction of between 3 and 30 percent over about a month. In a few cases, ratings tripled [see box on opposite page]. (Students did not need to enhance their relationships to receive extra credit; all they had to do was document their use of the techniques.)

The few exceptions I saw made sense. One heterosexual male saw no positive effects when he tried the exercises with another male; moreover, the experience made him “uncomfortable.” When he tried them with a female, however, his intimacy ratings increased by 25 percent—and hers increased by 144 percent!

A student named Olivia attempted the exercises with her brother, mother, a good friend and a relative stranger. Soul Gazing failed with her brother because he could not stop giggling. When she and her mom tried the Secret Swap—an activity that creates vulnerability when people disclose secrets to each other—intimacy ratings increased by 31 percent. Exercises she tried with her friend boosted ratings between 10 and 19 percent, but most impressive was the outcome of gazing with someone she

When your spouse is sick or in an otherwise vulnerable state, you may feel a need to protect and care for him, drawing you closer together.

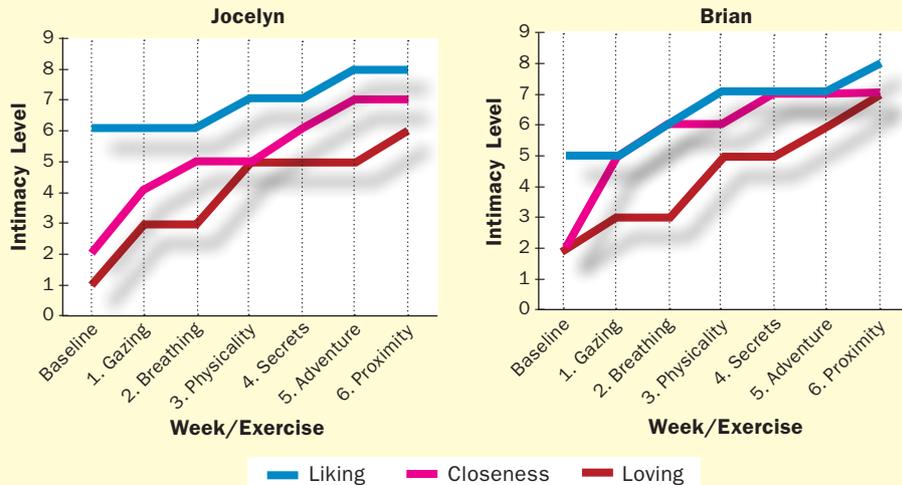


TOM STEWART Corbis (caring for partner); GETTY IMAGES (scientist and heart)

Extra Credit for Love

Jocelyn, aged 21, and Brian, aged 25, are students at the University of California, San Diego, where they tried some of the love-generating techniques they learned in the author's class on relationship science. These graphs show changes in feelings of liking (*blue*), closeness (*pink*) and loving (*red*) over six weeks. Each week the students tried one exercise. At the outset, they liked each

other fairly well but experienced little closeness or love. In the first week, the gazing technique had a big effect on closeness, especially for Brian. By the sixth week, Jocelyn's love for Brian had risen from a 1 to a 6 on a 10-point scale, and Brian's love for Jocelyn had climbed from a 2 to a 7. Brian and Jocelyn might have made progress without the exercises, but both felt the activities had helped.



barely knew: a 70 percent increase in intimacy.

One student did the assignment with her husband of five years. The couple, Asa and Gill, tried out eight different exercises, and even though their “before” scores were usually very high (9s and 10s), every exercise they tried increased their scores by at least 3 percent. Overall, Asa wrote, “I noticed a drastic change in our bond for one another. My husband seems more affectionate now than he was, for which I am really grateful.” She also reported a bonus: a substantial drop in the frequency with which she and her spouse called attention to their past mistakes. This change probably came about because the couple was now, as a result of my course, broadly interested in enhancing their relationship.

Taking Control

The students in my course were doing something new—taking *control* over their love lives. We grow up on fairy tales and movies in which magical forces help people find their soul mates, with whom they effortlessly live happily ever after. The fairy tales leave us powerless, putting our love lives into the hands of the Fates.

But here is a surprise: most of the world has nev-

er heard of those fairy tales. Instead more than half of marriages on our globe are brokered by parents or professional matchmakers, whose main concerns are long-term suitability and family harmony. In India an estimated 95 percent of the marriages are arranged, and although divorce is legal, India has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world. (This is starting to change, of course, as Western ways encroach on traditional society.)

Young couples in India generally have a choice about whether to proceed, and the combination of choice and sound guidance probably accounts for the fact that studies of arranged marriages in India indicate that they measure up well—in, for example, longevity, satisfaction and love—against Western marriages. Indeed, the love experienced by Indian couples in arranged marriages appears to be even more robust than the love people experience in “love marriages.” In a 1982 study psychologists Usha Gupta and Pushpa Singh of the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur, India, used the Rubin Love Scale, which gauges intense, romantic, Western-style love, to determine that love in love marriages in India does exactly what it does in love marriages here: it starts high and declines fairly rapidly. But love in the

Studies in Intimacy

Dozens of scientific studies illuminate how people fall in love—and hint at techniques for building strong relationships. Here are 10 kinds of investigations that are helping to inspire a new technology of love.

1 Arousal. Studies by researchers such as psychologist Arthur Aron of Stony Brook University show that people tend to bond emotionally when aroused, say, through exercise, adventures or exposure to dangerous situations. Roller coaster, anyone? See the Falling in Love exercise on page 29.

2 Proximity and familiarity. Studies by Stanford University social psychologists Leon Festinger and Robert Zajonc and others conclude that simply being around someone tends to produce positive feelings. When two people consciously and deliberately allow each other to invade their personal space, feelings of intimacy can grow quickly. See the Let Me Inside exercise on page 29.

3 Similarity. Opposites sometimes attract, but research by behavioral economist Dan Ariely of Duke University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and others shows that people usually tend to pair off with those who are similar to themselves—in intelligence, background and level of attractiveness. Some research even suggests that merely imitating someone can increase closeness. See the Monkey Love exercise on page 29.

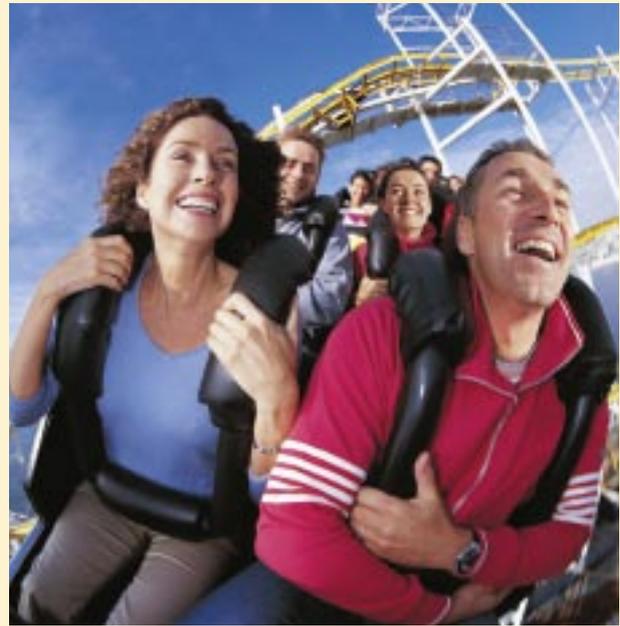
4 Humor. Marriage counselors and researchers Jeanette and Robert Lauer showed in 1986 that in long-term, happy relationships, partners make each other laugh a lot. Other research reveals that women often seek male partners who can make them laugh—possibly because when we are laughing, we feel vulnerable. Know any good jokes?

5 Novelty. Psychologist Greg Strong of Florida State University, Aron and others have shown that people tend to grow closer when they are doing something new. Novelty heightens the senses and also makes people feel vulnerable.

6 Inhibitions. Countless millions of relationships have probably started with a glass of wine. Inhibitions block feelings of vulnerability, so lowering inhibitions can indeed help people bond. Getting drunk, however, is blinding and debilitating. Instead of alcohol, try the Two as One exercise on page 29.

7 Kindness, accommodation and forgiveness. A variety of studies confirm that we tend to bond to people who are kind, sensitive and thoughtful. Feelings of love can emerge especially quickly when someone deliberately changes his or her behavior—say, by giving up smoking or drinking—to accommodate our needs. Forgiveness often causes mutual bonding, because when one forgives, one shows vulnerability.

8 Touch and sexuality. The simplest touch can produce warm, positive feelings, and a backrub can work wonders. Even getting very near someone without actually touch-



Riding a roller coaster or experiencing other thrills with your partner can help you bond emotionally by boosting arousal and making you each feel vulnerable.

ing can have an effect. Studies by social psychologist Susan Sprecher of Illinois State University, among others, also show that sexuality can make people feel closer emotionally, especially for women. There is danger here, however: confusing sexual attraction with feelings of love. You cannot love someone without knowing him or her, and attraction blinds people to important characteristics of their partner.

9 Self-disclosure. Research by Aron, Sprecher and others indicates that people tend to bond when they share secrets with each other. Once again, the key here is allowing oneself to be vulnerable. See the Secret Swap exercise on page 29.

10 Commitment. We are not that good at honoring our relationship commitments in the U.S., but studies by researchers such as psychologist Ximena Arriaga of Purdue University suggest that commitment is an essential element in building love. People whose commitments are shaky interpret their partners' behavior more negatively, for one thing, and that can be deadly over time. Covenant marriage—currently a legal option only in Arizona, Arkansas and Louisiana—is a new kind of marriage (emerging from the evangelical Christian movement) involving a very strong commitment: couples agree to premarital counseling and limited grounds for divorce. Conventional marriage in America can be abandoned easily, even without specific legal cause (the so-called no-fault divorce). —R.E.

arranged marriages they examined started out low and gradually *increased*, surpassing the love in the love marriage about five years out. Ten years into the marriage the love was nearly twice as strong.

How do they do it? How do people in some arranged marriages build love deliberately over time—and can we do it, too?

Over the past few years I have been interviewing people in arranged marriages in which love has grown over time. One of these couples is Kaiser and Shelly Haque of Minneapolis, who have been happily married for 11 years and have two bright, well-adjusted children. Once he had a secure life in the U.S., Kaiser, an immigrant from Bangladesh, returned to his native country to let his family know he was ready for matrimony. The family did the rest. After just one meeting with Shelly—where, Kaiser said, there was “like at first sight”—the ar-



Kaiser and Shelly Haque of Minneapolis met only once before their marriage was arranged in Bangladesh more than 11 years ago. Since then, the couple's love for each other has grown, an emotional trajectory that is not uncommon in arranged marriages.

said their love grew when they had children with their spouse. Studies in the U.S. routinely find parenting to be a threat to feelings of spousal love, but perhaps that tendency results from the strong feelings and unrealistic expectations that launch our

A careful look at arranged marriage, combined with the knowledge accumulating in relationship science, has the potential to give us real control over our love lives.

rangements were made. “We’ve grown to love each other and to get to know each other over time,” Kaiser says. “The sparks are getting bigger, and I think we can do even better in the future.”

Kaiser and Shelly are not atypical. A study that Mansi Thakar, a student at the University of Southern California, and I presented at the November 2009 meeting of the National Council on Family Relations included 30 individuals from nine countries of origin and five different religions. Their love had grown, on average, from 3.9 to 8.5 on a 10-point scale in marriages lasting an average of 19.4 years.

These individuals identified 11 factors that contributed to the growth of their love, 10 of which dovetailed beautifully with the scientific research I reviewed in my course. The most important factor was commitment, followed by good communication skills. The couples also identified sharing secrets with a spouse, as well as accommodation—that is, the voluntary altering of a partner’s behavior to meet the other person’s needs. Seeing a spouse in a vulnerable state (caused by injury or illness) was also singled out. There are many possible lessons here for Westerners, among them: do things deliberately that make you vulnerable to each other. Try experiencing danger, or thrilling simulations of it, as a couple. [For more tips based on U.S. research, see box on opposite page.]

The results conflicted with those of American studies in only one respect: several of the subjects

relationships. The stress of raising children tends to disrupt those expectations and ultimately our positive feelings for each other.

Creating Love

A careful look at arranged marriage, combined with the knowledge accumulating in relationship science, has the potential to give us real control over our love lives—without practicing arranged marriage. Americans want it all—the freedom to choose a partner and the deep, lasting love of fantasies and fairy tales. We can achieve that kind of love by learning about and practicing techniques that build love over time. And when our love is fading, we can use such techniques to rebuild that love. The alternative—leaving it to chance—makes little sense. **M**



(Further Reading)

- ◆ **An Exploratory Study of Love and Liking and Type of Marriages.** Usha Gupta and Pushpa Singh in *Indian Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 19, pages 92–97; 1982.
- ◆ **Love Games.** Mark Robert Waldman. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000.
- ◆ **Steps toward the Ripening of Relationship Science.** Harry T. Reis in *Personal Relationships*, Vol. 14, pages 1–23; 2007.
- ◆ **Handbook of Relationship Initiation.** Susan Sprecher, Amy Wenzel and John Harvey. Psychology Press, 2008.
- ◆ The author’s ongoing survey of arranged marriages (including how to participate) is at <http://ArrangedMarriageSurvey.com>
- ◆ Test your relationship skills at <http://MyLoveSkills.com>