

ANSWERS TO 50 QUESTIONS FROM THE MEDIA

Regarding Dr. Epstein's "Learning-to-Love" Experiment

1. What is your love experiment about? Give us some details.

I described the idea in detail in my editorial ("Editor as Guinea Pig: Putting Love to a True Test") in the May 2002 issue of Psychology Today. Briefly, I was looking for someone who would deliberately try to create a love relationship with me. I suggested that we sign an agreement—a Love Contract—pledging (a) not to date anyone else for the duration of the agreement (probably about 6 months), (b) to read extensively about love, (c) to put ourselves through various kinds of love counseling and exercises and perhaps to create exercises of our own, and (d) to keep private daily diaries of our experiences - the goal of all this being for us to fall deeply in love with each other before the end of the contract period. Ultimately, my goal was to learn how to package this process so that many others could use it.

2. What are some of the most common relationship myths?

In the U.S., the biggest myths are the ones we get from the fairy tales we read our children—and from Hollywood's various versions of those fairy tales. Myth #1: "The One" is out there for us, if only we can find him or her. Myth #2: Once we find "The One," he or she will never change, and neither will we. Myth #3: Once we find "The One," we'll live Happily Ever After. Myth #4: Love is a magical, mystical thing over which we have no control. It can't be studied; it can't be taught; it can't be learned.

3. What is your relationship history (marital status, past relationships, children, dating habits)?

Typical 21st century stuff: I have two exes who hate me (I won the custody battles) and four beautiful children whom I adore. I have dated occasionally when not completely swamped with work. I believe strongly in traditional marriage, but I've not had much luck with it.

4. How did you come up with the idea of this project?

The idea occurred to me when I was interviewing someone for an internship for Psychology Today. She said she was aspiring to be a writer and that she was interested in psychology. She also mentioned that she had never been in love. Later that night these various elements coalesced in my mind into a strange concept—that maybe she and I could somehow learn to love each other and write a book about it! The more I read about

“learning to love,” the less bizarre the idea appeared. Alas, she had a boyfriend.

5. How did you go about finding a partner?

I asked friends, colleagues, and family members to help out, and I also announced the project in an editorial in *Psychology Today*. I never actually solicited replies; I just announced the idea. To my complete surprise, I received more than a thousand letters and calls, and, for a while, I couldn't figure out exactly how to proceed. I was unable to read most of the letters I received. I just didn't have the time. Even if I could have read them all, it would have been impossible for me to evaluate so many people—or to take them out to dinner! I also tried to place a small ad in a local paper, but my ad was rejected twice. I submitted it as a “personals” ad, but the newspaper thought it should be posted as an “employment” ad. The ad never appeared.

6. What attributes do you look for in a prospective partner?

Intelligence, vitality, and a passion for the idea that we can exercise some deliberate control over our love lives—those are essential attributes.

7. Who do you think can benefit from your personal experiment?

A positive result might help those who aren't presently in love or who consistently fall in love with the wrong kind of person. It can also help couples trying to keep their love alive.

8. How have other people reacted when you've told them about the project?

The reactions have been overwhelmingly positive. Many of the letters I received weren't from prospective partners but simply from women saying that they hope very much that this project is successful—presumably because they wanted new tools to help make their own relationships work.

9. Could you highlight some relationship skills that you might use in the project?

The Love Contract itself lists of a number of key skills—communication, conflict resolution, and so on. My students I have done an extensive review of the research literature in this area, and we've concluded that there are seven different types of “competencies” that are helpful in building successful love relationships. We recently developed a test—the Epstein Love Competencies Inventory (ELCI or “Elsie”)—that will allow people to determine where their love skills are strong or weak.

10. How is arranged marriage relevant to your idea?

I'm not proposing that we adopt arranged marriage—that would never work in the West—but we can certainly learn from arranged marriage. Sixty percent of the world's marriages are arranged, and in many, people learn to love with each other over time. How does this happen? As yet, we're not sure, but I think we can find out. Also, the divorce rate for arranged marriages is very low.

11. Do you plan to marry? Have more children? How far will you take this relationship if it is successful?

I'd love to marry again, and I also wouldn't mind having more children. My greatest joys in life have come from my children—and, though I hate to admit it, I'm reading those troublesome fairy tales—the ones with all the love myths in them—to my own daughter these days. Maybe I need to start writing a new breed of children's books!

12. You said that a couple could learn to love each other over time. But what happens if one doesn't fall in love? When is it time to say goodbye?

There is no simple answer to this question, but the way I've dealt with it in the Love Contract is to have the two parties agree to an overall time limit to the process. When that time period has ended - perhaps three or six or 12 months - the process is over unless both parties agree to continue.

13. Lonely people say that it is very hard to find love. What's the advice for them - keep looking?

Yes, of course, keep looking, but it's also important to find new ways of looking: Join clubs or join a new church or take classes or use the Internet. You need to take an active role in finding a mate. The Love Contract gives you another alternative as well: Look around for someone who is already in your life - a co-worker or a neighbor, for example - and ask him or her to consider spending a few months trying to develop a mutual love with you.

14. What kind of men do women want and vice versa?

This varies a lot from individual to individual, but the classic answer is: Men want youth and beauty - a partner capable of producing and raising healthy children - and women want security - a partner capable of providing for herself and the children.

15. You received about 1000 applications for the love project. And you met with 15 of those women. Why didn't you find any 'Ms. Right' among these ladies?

Some were more interested in publicity than in me or the "learning-to-love" concept. Others were intimidated by all the media coverage.

16. How much did the looks of a candidate influence your choice? Wouldn't your experiment require a partner to whom you have only neutral feelings at first sight?

Physical attraction is important, especially early in a relationship. It helps motivate people to get to know each other better. But it's also important to know how to distinguish lust from love. That's an explicit goal in the Love Contract. When physical attraction is too strong, it can be blinding, and many people who think they are in love are actually just "in lust."

17. How did you find Gabriela? How did you introduce your experiment to her? And why did she accept your invitation to be your guinea pig?

We met by accident in an airplane on Christmas Day of 2002. We met a couple of times after that, and then I told her about my concept and asked if she'd be interested in signing a Love Contract with me. At first, she thought the idea was crazy. Then she read some articles about it and send some to her parents (without saying that she had met me). Her parents thought the idea was wonderful, since all of their children had been through divorces. So Gabriela thought she'd give the process a chance to work. But she was certainly never "my guinea pig." We decided mutually to give this idea a try.

18. According to some reports, you fell in love immediately with Gabriela, and you were even willing to give up the experiment if that was a condition of continuing to see her. So your relationship was from the beginning different from that of partners of an arranged marriage. One might say: The experiment went wrong from the start!

I think we each felt good about each other at first, but we certainly weren't in love, and our feelings waxed and waned after we met, just as they do in normal relationships. Just before we started the counseling, our feelings were very weak (especially Gabriela's feelings toward me). Over 8 intensive counseling sessions, our feelings improved (reaching about a 5 on a scale of 10 on our "love scale"). When Gabriela returned to Venezuela for several weeks, our feelings again become very weak. So it seems pretty clear that the counseling played an essential role in helping us to develop positive feelings about each other, and that's what this experiment is all about.

19. Who were the counselors you visit together with Gabriela?

We had counseling from:

Dr. Mark Kaupp of San Diego, California, a practitioner of “Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT),” a very intensive kind of therapy that helps to create emotional bonds.

Dr. Linda Savage of San Diego, California, who helped us with basic relationship skills.

Dr. John Gray of San Francisco, California, author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, who put us through an extremely intensive 5-hour session.

We also made tentative arrangements to receive counseling from Dr. David Olson, a leading relationships researcher, as well as from Dr. Susan Johnson, the creator of EFT.

20. What happened in those counseling sittings?

Dr. Savage helped us with communication and conflict resolution skills, and she also tried to help us cope with personality and cultural differences. Dr. Kaupp helped us to bond emotionally to some extent. The EFT technique is quite powerful. Dr. Gray put us through an intensive 5-hour session that was quite amazing. He put us each through exercises to help us understand the other person’s needs. Gabriela cried several times during this session, and after the session she left a note for me in my car that said “I love you.” Unfortunately, most of the progress we made during our counseling disappeared over time, when Gabriela was back in Venezuela.

21. What arrangements did you make, if any, for your sexual behavior? Does the Love Contract talk about sex?

The Love Contract simply says that we each are obligated to learn about each other’s needs, and that we’re committed to learning to distinguish lust from love. What we actually did with each other is a private matter.

22. What about the T.V. show featuring the Love Project?

The CBS news program “48 Hours” documented my experiment from the beginning. Another division of CBS had expressed interest in developing a reality show with multiple couples based on my concept, but they abandoned that idea when another network, Fox, came out with a similar show called “Married by America.” Unfortunately, that show distorted and sensationalized my idea, focusing on arranged marriage rather than on the process of learning to love.

23. What is your age? What is Gabriela’s age?

I turned 50 in June 2003, and Gabriela was 41 at that time.

24. What has been the reaction of your colleagues to this idea?

I've had an amazing amount of support from colleagues. In 2003 I was invited to give a talk about the learning-to-love idea before an audience of 2,000 therapists (at the Smart Marriages conference in Reno, Nevada), and some of the most distinguished relationship experts in the world served as advisors on the project, as follows:

Janice Levine, Ph.D., Harvard Medical School, couples therapist and co-author of *Why Do Fools Fall in Love?*

Howard Markman, Ph.D., University of Denver, distinguished relationships researcher and co-author of *Why Do Fools Fall in Love?*

John Gray, Ph.D., author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*

Patricia Love, Ed.D., co-founder of the Austin Family Institute; charter faculty member of the Imago Intitute

Diane Sollee, MSW, founder & director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family & Couples Education; director of the Smart Marriages Conference

Warren Farrell, Ph.D., author of *Women Can't Hear What Men Don't Say*

David Olson, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota; founder, Life Innovations, Inc.; distinguished relationships researcher

Susan Johnson, Ph.D., Ottawa University; developer of Emotionally-Focused Couples Therapy (EFT), perhaps the most effective couples therapy around today

25. In Alain de Botton's *Essays in Love*, he wrote after the meeting with Chloe: "Both of us felt we had never spoken like this to anyone before, that all the rest had been compromise and self-deception, that only now were we finally able to understand and make ourselves understood - that the waiting [messianic in nature] was truly over. I recognised in her the woman I had been clumsily seeking all my life. I was unable to contemplate the idea that meeting Chloe has simply been a coincidence." The relationship with Chloe ended up in tatters. Is it simply a fanciful idea? Do you think this type of imagination is perhaps necessary for the crystallisation of love (as suggested by *Stendhal's Love*), yet stands in the root of many failed relationships?

Research suggests that the “love at first sight” phenomenon is almost always “lust at first sight.” Relationships based on the kind of phenomenon you’re describing almost always end in tatters. The extreme passion one sometimes feels in the beginning of a relationship fades over time; it’s almost always down to half its strength within about 18 months—and can also disappear over a weekend. True psychological and emotional intimacy takes time to develop. Historically, the kind of instantaneous bond you describe was seen as a kind of madness, and love and passion weren’t considered a legitimate basis for marriage until recent times.

26. If one can learn to fall in love, can one learn to fall out of love, as a conscious choice? If one partner is in love, and the other is unresponsive, the rejected partner can learn how to fall out of love rather than being immersed in misery and anguish?

Thousands of people visit psychotherapists every year seeking help in overcoming rejection or in dealing with feelings of unrequited love. Several self-help books exist on this topic, as well. Yes, one can be helped to overcome these feelings.

27. If one can learn how to fall in love with a chosen partner, would you say that this is true only in heterosexual relationships? And if not, do you think that, for instance, a homosexual man can choose and learn to fall in love with a woman?

Political and religious considerations aside, I know of no reason to believe that same-sex couples can’t deliberately learn to love, or that a homosexual man can’t deliberately learn to love a woman. The research literature suggests, however, that before we can feel romantic love for someone, it’s helpful for us to feel physically attracted. The arousal systems in physical attraction seem to overlap considerably with those involved in love. So we probably need to start with some attraction. The big mistake we make, however, is in assuming that physical attraction is everything, or, worse yet, that it’s the same as love. Intense physical attraction fades fairly rapidly; it’s normally very weak within eighteen months or so after a passionate relationship has begun, often leaving nothing in its wake. The contract I’ve designed states that my partner and I will learn to distinguish lust from love; I consider this essential for long-term success in a relationship.

28. By learning to love, don’t you think you make love a commodity, a second-best alternative to ‘real’ passionate love, that you are talking of an altogether different emotional landscape than ‘real’ love?

Passionate love is already a commodity, sold to us in blockbuster movies from Hollywood. 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. Research suggests, for one thing, that many people in arranged marriages fall in love over time. A study conducted in India in the 1960s by Gupta and Singh, for example, shows that love in romantic marriages declines steadily over a ten-year period,

but that love in arranged marriages increases over the same period, surpassing that of romantic marriages after about five years. So the experience of people in arranged marriages teaches us that romantic love can be learned. Mental health professionals, struggling to help failing marriages, have developed tools that improve relationships and that can, in some cases, rekindle love. So I'm proposing simply that we package the process of learning to love so that a deep, lasting, romantic love will be available to more people.

29. Is it possible that the failure of marriages is because, as psychotherapist Adam Phillips argues in *Monogamy*, we are not naturally monogamous creatures? The values of Western modern life simply make it easier to leave unsatisfying relationships; divorce rates are soaring because it is ridiculous to ask people to spend decades with the same person.

Many factors contribute to the high divorce rate in the Western world—the emancipation and education of women, our need for instant gratification, and so on. But we are also plagued by myths that we learn from childhood, many of which originate with English fairy tales. Many women believe, for example, in the myth of *The One*—that a knight in shining armour is going to sweep them off their feet. We also believe a particularly dangerous myth—the myth of *Happily Ever After*—which sends us into long-term relationships with poor relationship skills and unrealistic expectations.

30. What is the basis of your claim that in about half of arranged marriages partners learn to love each other?

I've found a couple of studies on arranged marriage in India that suggest this number, but the number is by no means definitive. I've also been interviewing couples in arranged marriages. Whatever the percentage, there is no question that love sometimes blooms in arranged marriages and that the love that emerges in arranged marriages is often more enduring than the love that emerges in romantic marriages. A study by Gupta & Singh, published in the *Indian Journal of Applied Psychology* in 1982 found, as many studies have, that love in romantic marriages tends to decline dramatically over a 10-year period. But that study also found, on the average, that love in arranged marriages increased over this period, surpassing the love in romantic marriages at about the 5-year mark. Remember that through most of human history, romantic love was seen as a form of madness. It's only in the West, and only very recently, that it was seen a precondition for marriage.

31. Passion, you have argued, is not enough. Would you find it insufficient, yet necessary for sustaining a long lasting relationship?

Long-term studies of happy, successful marriages, such as one reported by Lauer and Lauer in 1985, suggest that passion plays little or no role in the long-term success of a relationship. Companionship and friendship seem to be much more important factors.

32. You proposed in the Sunday Times (London) to adopt “techniques that are reserved for failing relationships for use in those relationships that are just getting started.” But what if the first stages of a romance - with the passion and unrealistic expectations - are necessary for establishing the relationship, and indeed only while disillusionment inevitably arrives, one can start ‘working’ on the relationship. Aren’t you skipping a stage which cannot be skipped in fact?

What a dark and dreary model of romance! There is no evidence whatsoever to say that you need turmoil or disillusionment to create a successful relationship.

33. You say that there is no one ‘right’ partner predestined for us. Does that mean that one can learn to fall in love with almost anyone?

You probably need to feel at least a small degree of physical attraction toward someone as a prerequisite for feeling love. But physical attraction isn’t everything, and it’s a serious mistake to confuse it with love itself.

34. Psychotherapist Adam Phillips said in an interview that the key to happiness involves simple things: “The real questions are: Who looks after you when you’re ill? Who feeds you? Are you able to get on with people to do the things you need to do? The only cure is sociability, yet so much gets in the way of simply finding out what other people are like.” Do you agree?

I agree partially. One reason I’m so critical of dating—which is practiced by very few countries, by the way—is that it’s a process by which we deceive each other. Satisfaction in a relationship is based on intimate knowledge. We need ways to foster and maintain such knowledge throughout the relationship cycle.

35. “Remember that you don’t choose love. Love chooses you” (Kent Nerbur, Letters to My Son). What do you think of that?

Ridiculous and depressing. I’m much too much of an optimist to leave any form of happiness entirely to chance.

36. “Some people would never have fallen in love if they had not heard there was such a thing” (Francoise La Rochefoucauld, maxim 136). Is it plainly cynical?

There's probably some truth in this. Romantic love is already a commodity being sold to us by Hollywood, and it wasn't considered a basis for marriage until very recent times.

37. Why are the divorce rates so high? Is deep romantic love obsolete? Is it a failure of specific partnerships or do we, as modern creatures, lack the capacities to sustain relationships? Have we become too greedy?

Deep romantic love is not obsolete; we're just seeking it the wrong way. The more I've looked into the matter, the more I've come to believe that we can deliberately and systematically engineer deep, lasting romantic love.

38. "Love as mutual sexual satisfaction, and love as 'teamwork' and as a haven from aloneness are the two 'normal' forms of the disintegration of love in modern western society, the socially patterned pathology of love" (Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 1957). Fromm argued that love has become a commodity. Do you agree?

See above.

39. Do you think that both you and Erich Fromm delineate, substantially, the same type of loving relationships, only that Fromm perceived it negatively, (alienation, pathology of love) - a working relationship is not good enough - whereas you regard it positively: A relationship that works is good?

I'd have to review Fromm's writings on the subject carefully before answering this question. There is no question, however, that my position on this subject is inherently optimistic, perhaps even idealistic.

40. Would you agree that despite endless attempts to understand and analyse love, at the end of the day, the riddle of love is the riddle itself, and each relationship is unique in its own right?

No, not at all. Recent studies in Mexico, Italy, and England 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 or understood scientifically.

41. Couldn't it be that the reason why so many relationships end in failure is that many of us are very self-focused and no longer willing to work out problems together?

No question about that. But I think that we can overcome this problem to some extent and the counseling professions can help. The key, I now believe, is to erect “Four Pillars” very early in the relationship, to serve as a strong foundation for future years. These are: (1) Good relationship skills (communication, conflict resolution, etc.). (2) Psychological intimacy (in other words, it’s important to know your partner well - to find out WHO it is you’re in love with). (3) Realistic expectations (so you know what the future is REALLY likely to bring and so that you can prepare appropriately). (4) Strong commitment.

42. In one recent interview you compare the high divorce rate in the U.S. to the low divorce rate in India, where 95 percent of marriages are arranged. But isn’t it true that although divorce may be a legal option in India, it is not as accepted as in our society and therefore people don’t divorce?

Absolutely correct. It’s hard to make comparisons across cultures. But studies in India indicate that even among educated urban professionals, arranged marriage works pretty well and that in many couples, people learn to love over time. That is what’s important here—to recognize that it’s possible to deliberately learn to love. And in India, those couples don’t even have the benefit of professional counselors to help them!

43. You also state scientists from India who have found out that couples in arranged marriages after five years are for the most part more in love than those in romantic marriages. But couldn’t it be that after five more years they will start having the same problems as the couples who were romantically in love from the start?

That particular study, by Gupta and Singh, was a 10-year study. The couples in the arranged marriages were experiencing TWICE the love after 10 years than the couples in romantic marriages. And “in love” is probably the right term here, since these researchers used an American scale, the “Rubin Love Scale,” to measure the love their couples were experiencing.

44. Do you think that people have a harder time making their relationships last if they didn’t experience loving, lasting relationships within their family?

There’s no question about that. A recent long-term (25-year) study of the children of divorced parents shows that, in general, such children have a hard time making their own relationships work, probably because they had poor role models when they were growing up.

45. How is it possible to learn to love somebody?

To begin with, two people need to be “basically compatible”—by which I mean that they must NOT have characteristics that the other person finds strongly objectionable. They

must also be at least somewhat attracted to each other. Given these very basic requirements—which each of us shares, most likely, with thousands of other people—I believe that two people can learn to love if (a) they make a strong commitment to do so, (b) they agree not to date other people while they are developing their relationship, and (c) they engage in various love-promoting activities, such as “love counseling,” to develop openness and fondness for each other. The details are specified in my “Love Contract.”

46. Who do you think can benefit from your love project?

Everyone, young and old. The way we currently seek love and romance - suggested to us by silly fairy tales and absurd Hollywood movies - simply doesn't work. It causes heartache and instability. The way I'm suggesting is better.

47. Why do you think a romantic and passionate love often fails?

First, because we often confuse love with lust. The passion we feel is often just strong physical attraction, and that fades rapidly - usually quite substantially within 18 months. When the passion fades, and the fog begins to clear, we begin to find out who our partner REALLY is, and this is often disappointing. Because of strong passion, we often fail at the outset to recognize basic things about our partner; in other words, although we may be physically intimate, we are not psychologically intimate. Lasting, “true” love is based on psychological intimacy - on knowing who are partner really is and loving that reality.

48. Many singles have problems finding someone to love. What's the advice for them - keep looking?

The mistake we make is in leaving the entire process to chance - and also in assuming that there's just one perfect person for us - the “soul mate.” There are actually many people around us with whom we could - very deliberately - create a deep and lasting love. We need to look around us with new eyes, new assumptions, and new skills. Looking in the old way often leads to loneliness and turmoil.

49. Even though your relationship with Gabriela failed, you regard the experiment as a success. Can you explain this?

All experiments are successful if we can learn from them. There is no question that the commitment we made to each other and the counseling we had greatly strengthened our feelings for each other. If we had lived near each other - and if I hadn't been foolish enough (over Gabriela's strong objections!) to allow the media to follow us around - I believe we would still be together today. When I signed my second Love Contract, it was with someone local, and we pursued our relationship in private. At this writing (April 2005) my new partner and I have been together for over a year, and we're doing well.

50. What are the latest developments in your relationship with Gabriela?

In April 2003, it looked like our experiment had come to an end. When we first met (in December 2002), it seemed possible that we could eventually create a life together in the United States (assuming we achieved the very beautiful goals of the Love Contract): Venezuela was on the verge of a civil war, and Gabriela's extended family there was thinking about fleeing the country. Gabi was also unemployed at that time. In addition, Gabi has three adult siblings who live in the U.S., and Gabi had once lived in Miami, Florida. But circumstances soon changed. Venezuela's national strike ended in early 2003, and the political climate began to improve. Also, in March when Gabi told her children that they might move to the U.S. at some point, they weren't happy about the idea—especially her 13-year-old twin girls. But the commitment we made to each other (through the Love Contract) and the counseling process we began had an impact on us that we just couldn't seem to ignore. When June 14th approached—the date when our contract was supposed to expire—we began exchanging romantic emails and talking on the phone frequently. I was scheduled to give a talk about the “learning-to-love” idea at a conference in Reno, Nevada on June 28, 2003 (to an audience of 2,000 couples counselors), and I invited Gabriela to join me there. Our feelings were quickly renewed, and she then visited me and my children in San Diego. In July Gabriela wrote a private letter to the director of the Reno conference crediting the deep love we had achieved to the commitment we made and the counseling we had, and we continued to see each other and to communicate nearly every day until October 2003. Ultimately, though, we were defeated by distance and circumstances. We live in different countries, and we each have children in those countries whom we adore. During the summer of 2003 Gabi was appointed director of the Venezuela's National Theater, which made it even more difficult for us to see each other and further solidified her ties to her country. Here is the bottom line: The first question I asked was, “Can people deliberately learn to love each other?” (with a commitment and some professional help). The answer to that question seems to be yes, and I say that not only based on my experience with Gabi, but based on the experience of millions of people in arranged marriages. But our experience raised a more traditional question: “Can love conquer all?” Apparently not, at least not for us. In March 2004 I signed a new Love Contract with another woman—this time, with someone local and NO media coverage. (It's difficult enough to build a healthy relationship under normal circumstances; it's virtually impossible on camera. So much for all those silly reality TV shows!) The intensive love counseling we had was extremely helpful, and we've now been together for over a year. At this point I'm continuing to interview couples in arranged marriages, and I also plan to pursue this project further by testing the Love Contract idea with multiple couples and a control group. /Robert Epstein

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