

Philosopher Erich Fromm on Why People Fail at Love

Seeking advice about the qualities he should look for in a mate, an unmarried man in his 30s posted at the online sports forum of my alma mater. He invited comments on his list of top attributes: looks, camaraderie, cooking ability, love of the alma mater (this man attends every game), and patience.

He thought his problem was finding a woman with the right qualities to love him.

His post generated a lengthy thread—many men at the forum had strong opinions on the most desirable traits in a mate.

Most of us would say love is important. Indeed, social psychologist Erich Fromm in his classic book [*The Art of Loving*](#) writes many “are starved for [love]; they watch endless numbers of films about happy and unhappy love stories, they listen to hundreds of trashy songs about love.”

Are we asking the wrong questions about marriage and love? Fromm observes, “Most people see the problem of love primarily as that of *being loved*, rather than that of *loving*, of one’s capacity to love.”

As the thread at the forum demonstrated, many search for love with a shopping list of attributes. “Yet,” Fromm observes, “hardly anyone thinks that there is anything that needs to be learned about love.”

Love cannot enter where one’s beliefs make love unwelcome. Could a fundamental shift in orientation from a focus on *being loved* to a focus on *being loving* make love more welcome in our life?

Fromm dismantles myths about love and provides a mindset

adjustment for anyone willing to consider his ideas.

Realize 'love is an art, just as living is an art'

People say *he or she is lucky in love*. That belief is nonsense, according to Fromm.

You can learn the “art of loving,” and Fromm points out essential steps. As in the mastery of any art, the capacity to be loving requires “mastery of the theory” and “mastery of the practice.” Crucially, Fromm instructs, “there is a third factor necessary to becoming a master in any art—the mastery of the art must be a matter of ultimate concern; there must be nothing else in the world more important than the art.”

Given there are so many failed marriages, Fromm would say few people value “the art of loving.” Why?

He writes, “In spite of the deep-seated craving for love, almost everything else is considered to be more important than love: success, prestige, money, power—almost all our energy is used for the learning of how to achieve these aims, and almost none to learn the art of loving.”

Fromm’s words jolt us like a bucket of ice water. There is nothing intrinsic to modern life that causes marriages to fail. Instead, our personal hierarchy of values gives too low a priority to being loving. Each of us has a responsibility to learn to grow our capacity to be loving.

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Immature love says: 'I love you because I need you.' Mature love says 'I need you because I love you.' Erich Fromm
[#LizQuen5thAnniversary](#)

– MCrisD (@MCrisDumlao) [March 13, 2018](#)

Understand infatuation is only the beginning

Fromm observes, "There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet, which fails so regularly, as love."

Mere infatuation won't last. Fromm writes, "The two persons become well acquainted, their intimacy loses more and more its miraculous character, until their antagonism, their disappointments, their mutual boredom kill whatever is left of the initial excitement."

What comes after infatuation wears off? For partners who are not willing to become more loving, often the relationship dissolves. Then they are on to another relationship where they aim to get a better deal from a person who they believe will love them more. Believing love is merely a "mutually favorable exchange," they go right back to looking for the "right object to love—or to be loved by."

An endless cycle repeats, proving Fromm's essential point: Love is not merely a "pleasant sensation" but instead requires "knowledge and effort."

We get confused, Fromm writes, with "the initial experience of '*falling*' in love, and the permanent state of *being* in love."

Love, Fromm describes, is "an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love."

Being in love is a skill to master, not a transitory feeling. *Being in love* depends on increasing our own capacity to love.

Place character first

Those interested in increasing their capacity to be loving should consider the character traits identified with successful, loving relationships. Fromm instructs, "Satisfaction in individual love cannot be attained without the capacity to love one's neighbor, without true humility, courage, faith and discipline. In a culture in which these qualities are rare, the attainment of the capacity to love must remain a rare achievement."

How many of us have considered the possibility that building character enhances our capacity to be loving and significantly increase the odds of finding a partner with whom to build a good life?

How many of us place character first?

Most people, Fromm finds, think "being lovable is essentially a mixture between being popular and having sex appeal." There is nothing wrong with brightening our smile or becoming more successful, but to be loving, the development of character comes first.

For those trying to find a mate or build a healthy marriage, Fromm has provided a North Star to help us stay on course.

