Dear Alice,

I don't know what love is. My family thinks it's a kind of trade, or reciprocity. If they do for me, they demand "love" in return. I'm pretty sure that isn't love. I'm an adult now, and have no desire to be indebted to anyone, hence I don't pursue relationships. But I'm pretty sure love isn't reciprocity, and I know I've never felt love. How does one go about learning to love?

Loveless

Answer

Dear Loveless,

You are not alone in your quest to understand the meaning of love. You say also that you've never felt love and that you'd like to learn how to love. In this, too, you are not alone. English is a limiting language when it comes to talking about love. Spanish, for example, has words that describe love for family and different words that describe romantic love. Do you feel that you have never felt love towards anyone, or that you've never felt love for a romantic partner?

Of romantic love, Rainer Maria Rilke said that "For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation." Why should love be work? Truly loving someone requires a willingness to open oneself up — to be vulnerable with another person. This feat is tough for most, if not all of people, but it has likely been made harder for you if you've been given the message that love doesn't come free. What's the consequence if you don't pay it back? It's understandable that you might want to avoid relationships as an adult if you did not experience unconditional, "debt-free" love from your family. However, keep in mind that any loving, healthy relationship also involves some give-and-take.

There are many kinds of love. Even romantic love comes in many varieties. There's the "crush" for example, a feeling of really enjoying another person's company. A lot. A crush is sort of like "pre-love." You may feel a sexual attraction but also there is usually a feeling of connection beyond the sexual realm. Limerence is a term that describes the experience of having an intense, nearly obsessive crush. Also termed infatuation, it always has a sexual component as
well as an emotional component, though this phase of love is usually just that — a phase. Often, it stems from an over-idealization of another. It can result in feelings of the most profound joy if such love is returned and can become the source of deep despair if it is not. Here perhaps originates the term "broken heart." This form of love, which sometimes characterizes the early stages of a relationship (when it's reciprocal), has an addictive quality.

Because no one can really experience the emotions of another, it can be difficult to know exactly how love "should" feel. People often describe a variety of feelings that go into the experience of loving: profound joy upon seeing the other person, a desire to be in physical contact, a feeling of calm or comfort in the presence of the loved one, a desire to nurture, and/or be nurtured by the other person. In a long-term relationship, feelings of love and affection can ebb and flow, as can feelings of sexual attraction, but there remain baseline feelings of closeness and attachment, often described as companionate love. Here's something else that's interesting to consider: Some people describe love as an action (or choice) rather than a feeling. That is, acknowledging that feelings come and go, ebb and flow, and grow and fade, but that making the choice to love someone, to show up (even when you don't want to) is what "real" love is.

Have you considered talking with a counselor about your feelings of lovelessness? It sounds like you already have a great deal of insight about your own emotions and how your history has shaped your experience. Therapy may be another resource that can help you gain an even deeper understanding and can help you work through some of those deep seated thoughts and feelings about love. A therapy group may be another helpful route. Group sessions can be immensely helpful because they can help break isolation, provide a venue for you to give and receive help others, and they can be a space where participants work through family issues in an environment that is relational and safe. There are groups centered around lots of different topics: drug addiction, love addiction, surviving violence, surviving suicide, bereavement, living with major illness, and many others. Even if you can't find one near you specifically about this issue of loving, you may be able to find one that is relevant to you in some other way which may still help because so much about love can be learned through your connection to other people in the group.

It's true that there is often a reciprocity element to love, but it is does not have to be obligatory. In fact, for many people, love (like much of human emotion) is not even voluntary. This does not mean that it can't be learned, but rather that having lots of gentle patience with yourself may be in order as you learn to love.

Wishing you an abundance of love throughout your life,

Alice!

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