



To know you
is to love you

Marriage researchers Benjamin R. Karney and Lisa A. Neff have found that compassionate spouses have longer, more supportive marriages. But to be a compassionate spouse, you need more than love.

Despite the optimism of newlyweds, most marriages eventually end in divorce. Marriage counselors often advise couples to treat each other more affectionately, to express empathy, and to learn to compromise on each other's behalf. This seems like reasonable advice, but for many people it also seems to be difficult advice to follow.

So thinking about marriage raises some general questions about the challenges of improving human behavior. How can we inspire people to act in each other's best interests? How is it that people ever put the needs of others before their own, and how can we get people to do this more often? How, basically, can we get people to be nicer to each other?

These are questions that philosophers and social scientists have grappled with for centuries. The 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes believed that humans were not individually capable of transcending their selfish natures and so suggested that the function of government is to rein in our basic impulses. In the absence of governmental restraints, he wrote in his *Leviathan*, life would be "nasty, brutish, and short." In other words, people will be nice to others only when forced to do so. In the mid-20th century, B.F. Skinner and other "behaviorist" psychologists said the only sure way to get people to help each other is to make it personally rewarding for them to do so. In other words, people will be nice to others only when it benefits themselves.

Both these views of human nature suggest that cooperative behavior is inherently fragile. Take away the constraints or the rewards, and cooperation should fall apart.

Our research has a very different take on human nature. As researchers who have devoted our careers to studying the first few years of marriage, we have focused on the phenomenon of compassionate love between spouses. We care about compassionate love because we expect it to inspire positive behaviors toward others, behaviors like self-sacrifice, tolerance, charity, and support. Compassionate lovers break free from the Hobbesian and the behaviorist worldview because compassionate lovers do these things even at a cost to the self, and even when they are not forced to do so by social constraints. Thus our attempts to identify the causes and correlates of compassionate love in marriage seem to be a step in a new and promising direction toward understanding positive human relations.

But is it so new? A second glance at definitions of compassionate love reveals a paradox, perhaps a contradiction, that brings us uncomfortably back to the behaviorists' ideas. In current thinking, it is not enough for compassionate lovers to put the needs of others before their own. They have to delight in doing it. They have to be fulfilled by advancing the growth of another person. This does not sound selfless any more. Indeed, the behaviorists see an element of selfishness in even the most selfless behavior.

Compassionate love researchers do not really disagree with this. Current views of compassionate love do not preclude taking pleasure in the benefit of others, but rather feature

that pleasure as a central element. In specifying what compassionate love is, then, the challenge is to figure out how to reconcile these elements of selflessness and self-interest.

We have been developing a model of compassionate love between spouses that may help resolve this paradox. Our research has shown that newlyweds who fit our definition of compassionate lovers do in fact have longer, more supportive marriages. In this essay we will present our model of compassionate love and our data showing the benefits of compassionate love in marriage. But first we will briefly explain why we think marriage is an especially relevant area in which to study compassionate love.

First, to the extent that compassionate love promotes behavior that benefits another person, compassionate love should be an important, even crucial, element of a successful marriage. One should expect spouses who love each other compassionately to stay together longer, be happier, and support each other more effectively than couples who do not love each other compassionately. Conversely, it is hard to imagine a successful marriage in which spouses are not able, at least occasionally, to put each other's needs before their own.

Second, learning how to foster truly compassionate love between spouses seems to be a necessary first step toward promoting compassionate love toward humanity as a whole. If we cannot find a way for husbands and wives, who know each other and have vowed to honor

the greatest). There are two important implications of this model. First, spouses who believe their partners to be wonderful people overall may still hold a range of positive and negative beliefs about their partners' specific qualities. Second, these perceptions of a partner's specific qualities may not necessarily agree with the partner's self-image. While some spouse's specific views of their partners may be unrealistically positive or negative, other spouses may see their partners as their partners see themselves. Among happily married couples, then, some spouses may demonstrate a deep understanding of their partners' specific qualities, whereas other spouses may have little insight into their partners' qualities.

We suggest that compassionate love may be a love that recognizes the partner's specific positive and negative qualities, while simultaneously affirming the partner's overall worth. Purely romantic love, in contrast, may be defined as love that glorifies the partner without understanding the partner's specific qualities. While the romantic lover holds the partner in high esteem, ignoring faults and weaknesses, the compassionate lover holds the partner in high esteem while at the same time recognizing and even embracing specific faults and weaknesses.

What makes this love compassionate? Consider that if we truly believed that everything about our partners was fabulous, then loving them would not be very difficult. Indeed, some spouses may not be able to love their partners unless they view each of their partners'

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each other, to be compassionate, then promoting compassion toward strangers is going to be a difficult nut to crack.

Third, newlyweds are an appropriate place to distinguish between compassionate love and other kinds of love. As you might imagine, newlyweds all claim to love one another. We have interviewed hundreds of newlyweds, and when we asked them, "Do you love your partner?" they look at us like we're crazy. They get offended by the question: "Of course, I love my partner. We just got married!" Furthermore, they tend to score high on every kind of love scale thrown at them. Newlyweds are passionate, companionate, they like and love each other, and when asked, they profess their undying willingness to make sacrifices for each other. And yet not all of these couples love each other in the same way. Studying newlyweds closely may suggest ways of teasing apart the compassionate lovers from the other lovers.

A model of compassionate love

Our model rests on the premise that love for a partner originates in a variety of beliefs and judgments, ranging from perceptions of the partner's specific traits and abilities (e.g., My partner is a great cook) to global evaluations of the partner as a whole (e.g., My partner is

specific traits favorably. In this case, the spouse may be unwilling to accept a partner's faults, and once the partner's less-than-perfect traits become apparent, the spouse's love for the partner may dissipate. However, understanding and accepting a partner's specific strengths and weaknesses may represent a selfless act, in that spouses endure the costs of their partners' faults, weaknesses, and limitations—but love them anyway. Compassionate love is personally fulfilling, in that spouses can reap the rewards of their love, but it is also selfless, in that spouses accept their partners for who they are, the good and the bad.

The goal of our research has been to identify spouses who compassionately love their partners and to examine the implications of compassionate love for marital well-being. To address these issues, we have been following 250 newly-married couples over the first four years of their marriage. When these couples were first married, we asked spouses not only to rate their current feelings about their marriage, but also to report on their global and specific evaluations of themselves and their partners. That is, we asked spouses whether they considered themselves and their partner to be good, worthy people, and we also asked them to rate themselves and their partners on numerous specific traits and abilities,

such as intellectual ability, social skills, extraversion, and conscientiousness.

We found that virtually all spouses reported they were extremely happy with their marriage and that they held their partner in the highest regard. In fact, most spouses viewed their partners as better, more worthy people than even the partners viewed themselves to be. However, spouses varied significantly in the extent to which they understood their partners' self-perceived traits and abilities. Thus, only a subset of these loving, newly-married couples seemed to be engaging in compassionate love, in which a globally positive view of the partner is linked to an accurate understanding of the partner's specific strengths and weaknesses.

We also found a connection between spouses' understanding of their partners' traits and the quality of the couple's interactions. We had couples engage in a series of tasks in which each spouse was asked to choose a personal problem or difficulty they were facing and discuss that problem with their partner. A panel of independent observers then rated the supportiveness of the partner's behaviors during the discussion. Wives who displayed a greater understanding of their husbands' specific traits were rated as providing better support to their husbands in these interactions than were wives with less understanding of their husbands' qualities. Given that all couples reported being very happy with their partner and the marriage, these results suggest that caring for a partner may not be enough to pro-

relationship. For instance, while husbands' support skills may not be helped by an understanding of their wives' qualities, behavioral skills that we didn't study here, such as their conflict resolution abilities, may be enhanced in husbands when they understand their wives' specific traits. Further research is needed into the influence that husbands' specific understanding may have on marital processes. At this point, however, we have no reason to believe that understanding is not a good thing for both spouses.

The implications of knowing and adoring

Overall, these findings suggest that loving a partner compassionately may have important benefits for marriage. First, compassionate love has benefits for the beloved. While it may be good to be the object of love, it is better to be the object of a love that is coupled with understanding. When spouses are both loved and understood, they are likely to get better support from their partners. Second, compassionate love has benefits for the lover. Wives who loved their husbands compassionately were in marriages that were less likely to dissolve over time. Spouses whose initial feelings of love were based on a relatively accurate understanding of the partners' specific qualities began the marriage accepting their partners' limitations. These spouses should not be surprised by their partners' negative qualities and thus should be less likely to react poorly when their partners' weaknesses surface over the course of the relationship.

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vide positive social support. Instead, it seems that holding each other in high esteem while also understanding one another's specific qualities may allow spouses to give both the loving encouragement and the specific information necessary to support a partner effectively.

Loving a partner compassionately also seems to contribute to marital stability over time. We found that when wives had a deeper understanding of their husbands' specific qualities, the couple was less likely to divorce over the first four years of marriage. Importantly, this finding held regardless of whether the wives' specific views of their husbands were positive or negative. In other words, it was only when wives understood their partner's traits, not necessarily when they viewed those traits positively, that the marriage fared better over time.

Why did marriages only seem to benefit when wives understood their partners' specific qualities? Husbands varied significantly in their understanding of their wives, such that some husbands understood their wives' traits and abilities better than other husbands. However, husbands' understanding was not associated with their support abilities or with couples' likelihood of divorce. One possible reason for this apparent gender difference may be that husbands' understanding of their wives' qualities has different effects on the

It is important to emphasize that understanding a partner's specific qualities by itself did not enhance marital quality. Nor did simply loving the partner. Rather, it was the combination of loving and understanding the partner that was associated with better marital quality. It seems that spouses in healthy, stable marriages may love their partners in spite of (or perhaps because of) their less-than-perfect specific traits.

How can we foster compassionate love both within marriage and between people in general? The advice just to love one another is too simple. Love without understanding is not enough, not helpful, not likely to enhance relationships. Understanding may be the key to empathy and love.

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