What Kind of Lover Are You?

10 MIN READ

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Harvard Research Reveals Two Ways Humans Love

This week, as love floods our feeds in the form of Valentine's greetings, Galentine's brunches, "Platonic soulmate" tributes, even Bad Bunny halftime show replays, it's clear that something is shifting in what we mean when we talk about love.

Across social platforms, cultural conversations, and even research labs, love is being reframed not as a romantic ideal, but as an organizing principle for a well-lived life. This shift matters. Especially now.

Researchers at Harvard have been outlining a new way of looking at love. Here's what they're finding that might change how you think about your own relationships.

What Harvard Researchers Are Actually Saying About Love

- Love is not just a feeling or a relationship status. It's a measurable disposition.
- There are two core ways humans love: being *with* people and being *for* them.
- These patterns predict mental health, physical health, and long-term flourishing.
- Love of neighbor is now being studied as a public health factor, not a private virtue.

Why Love Is Now Being Studied as a Public Health Factor

Epidemiologist Tyler VanderWeele, at **Harvard's Human Flourishing Program**, has posed a question that sounds simple but carries real weight: why is love central to our personal lives but almost entirely absent from our public discourse?

His answer is the **Love of Neighbor Initiative**, and it's not a soft cultural project. VanderWeele's team has developed **validated psychometric tools, published in *Frontiers in Psychology***, to measure love across countries and cultures. They're actively advocating for love to be recognized as a social determinant of health by the World Health Organization, the American Psychiatric Association, and in the DSM. In the same category as clean water. The same category as access to healthcare.

Their **research** backs their efforts:

- Parental love predicts flourishing into adulthood.
- Forgiveness, which, in VanderWeele's framework, functions as a restoration of love, lowers depression and anxiety.
- Acts of kindness produce measurable effects on health.
- Sibling love in adolescence is associated with better sleep, lower anxiety, and greater optimism decades later

We have national campaigns for exercise, nutrition, and mental health awareness. VanderWeele is asking why we don't have one for love.

The Science of Love: Two Dispositions, Not One

What makes VanderWeele's research particularly interesting is what it reveals about how love actually works. As he writes: "We all desire to be loved. We only fully flourish when we are loved."

But what, exactly, is love? His team's **study**, validated across 10,485 adults in the U.S., Australia, Canada, the U.K., and several other countries, doesn't treat love as a

single feeling or a personality trait. It treats love as a disposition, a relatively stable pattern of motivation, attention, and action. VanderWeele's team is attempting to map love's full architecture. Here's how far they've gotten:

At the foundation are two distinct kinds of love.

1. **Being With = Unitive Love:** Presence. Understanding. The desire to listen, to take joy in another person, to participate in their life — not because of what they can offer, but because of who they are. It's the impulse to sit with a friend in silence and feel that the silence itself is enough.
2. **Being For = Contributory Love**: The desire to do good for another person, to help, to show compassion, to contribute to their wellbeing because their humanity matters to you. It's the impulse to bring the meal, send the resource, to show up when things are hard.

In other words: love isn't primarily about romance or personality. It's about *how your attention, motivation, and behavior are oriented toward other people*. Some of us love by showing up and being present. Others love by helping, protecting, and contributing. Most of us do both, but we usually lead with one. These two kinds of love are the root system and they branch into a fuller taxonomy of love.

The Architecture of Love, According to Harvard Researchers

- **Unitive love**: presence, understanding, shared being
- **Contributory love**: helping, protecting, acting for another's good
- **Connected love**: prioritizing union
- **Caring love**: prioritizing wellbeing
- **Intimate love**: deep mutual knowing
- **Appreciative love**: recognizing dignity and worth

- **Committed love**: sustained intention over time

The study also distinguishes between love as attitude and emotion (what we feel toward someone) and love as action and behavior (what we actually do). They're separate constructs, which means they can be measured independently. And most of us have experienced the gap between them: loving someone deeply and still not calling, not showing up, not following through.

Perhaps the most radical element of the framework is what it means by "neighbor." Not your literal neighbor. Any human person, but especially someone you encounter or interact with, is your neighbor (Mr. Rogers would approve). And the motive for neighborly love, in VanderWeele's definition, is simply the other person's humanity. Not affection. Not familiarity. Not what they've done for you. Their humanity alone is sufficient reason to love them.

Because love is a disposition, not a fixed personality feature, the researchers frame it as something that can shift over time and context. It's a practice. Which means the patterns we see in ourselves aren't verdicts but starting points.

Try This: A 2-Minute Harvard-Backed Love Assessment

The following 12 statements are adapted from VanderWeele's **Love of Neighbor Assessment**, validated across more than 10,000 adults in multiple countries. Take two minutes.

1. Read each statement
2. Rate yourself honestly: **1** (not at all true of me) to **5** (completely true of me).
3. Don't overthink it. Your first instinct is the most useful one.

BEING WITH (UNITIVE LOVE)

- **U1**: I deeply desire to be fully present with those I encounter.
- **U2**: I make necessary sacrifices in order to listen to others.
- **U3**: I try to find joy in every person I meet.
- **U4**: I seek to understand every person in my life just as they are.
- **U5**: I seek to be with others because every person has incredible worth and dignity.
- **U6**: I am fully committed to participating in the lives of others.

BEING FOR (CONTRIBUTORY LOVE)

- **C1**: I deeply desire the wellbeing of every person I encounter.
- **C2:** I make necessary sacrifices in order to help the people I meet.
- **C3**: My own wellbeing depends on meaningfully contributing to the wellbeing of others.
- **C4**: Whenever appropriate, I seek to show those around me affection or compassion.
- **C5**: I seek the wellbeing of others because every person has incredible worth and dignity.

- **C6** I am fully committed to having goodwill toward others, even those who have hurt me.

SCORING:

Add your U scores (U1–U6) and your C scores (C1–C6) separately. You'll have two numbers, each between 6 and 30.

If your U score is notably higher: You lead with presence. You're the person who makes people feel known, who listens, who shows up, who finds joy in simply being with someone. Your growth edge is the contributory side: the follow-through, the tangible help, the showing up in practical ways when presence alone isn't what someone needs.

If your C score is notably higher: You lead with action. You're the person who makes things happen for the people around you, who contributes, who sacrifices, who shows compassion when it counts. Your growth edge is the unitive side: slowing down, being present without an agenda, letting a relationship exist without a task attached to it.

If they're close: You're practicing both. VanderWeele's broader research suggests that the fullest expression of love, the kind most consistently linked to flourishing, involves both aspects working together. Not just wanting to be with someone, but actively working for their good. Not just doing for them, but delighting in who they are. Most longevity research has measured relationship quality as a stand-in for love. This is one of the first tools designed to directly measure universal, everyday love across cultures, not romance, not caregiving, but how we show up for the people we encounter.

How to Use This Insight

- **If you lead with** *being with*, practice small acts of practical care
- **If you lead with** *being for*, practice presence without fixing
- **If you're balanced,** protect that balance, it's linked to flourishing

One more thing worth sitting with: this assessment isn't measuring how you love your best friend or your partner. It's a measure of how you love your *neighbor*. It's about recognizing our shared humanity. That's what makes it radical. And that's what makes it a practice, not a personality test.

Also of note, this assessment doesn't measure self love. That's a different construct with its own body of research. But it's worth noticing whether the way you extend presence and care to others is also something you extend to yourself.

Now Try This: The 2-Minute Connection Reset

Grab a pen. Set a timer. Ask yourself:

- Who calms your nervous system? Who shows up? Who knows you over time? Write down everyone you can think of.
- Who have you had a meaningful conversation with in the past two weeks? In the past month? In the past year?
- Who would you call at 2 a.m. in a crisis?
- Where do those lists overlap?
- How can you nourish those relationships in a meaningful and regular way?

Now pick one name. If you lead with presence, do something concrete for them this week, not a text, a real act of support. If you lead with action, call them and just listen. No agenda. No fixing. Just the conversation itself.

This Valentine’s, the most radical thing you can do for your health is pick up the phone and call a friend. Because love isn’t just who you’re with. It’s how you show up, and that pattern shapes your health, your relationships, and how well you live.

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