

## Head Over Heels

### How to Fall in Love and Land on your Feet

By Dr. James Dobson

Many young people grow up with a very distorted concept of romantic love. The confusion begins when boy meets girl and the entire sky lights up in romantic profusion. Smoke and fire are followed by lightning and thunder, and the dazzled couple finds itself knee deep in what may or may not turn out to be true love. Adrenaline is pumped into the cardiovascular system by the pint, and every nerve is charged with 220 volts of electricity. Then two little couriers go racing up the respective backbones of the boy and girl and blast their exhilarating messages into each spinning head: "This is it! The search is over! I've found the perfect human being! Hooray for love!"

For our romantic young couple, it is simply too wonderful to believe. They want to be together 24 hours a day – to take walks in the rain and sit by the fire and kiss and smooch and cuddle. They get all teary-eyed just thinking about each other. And it doesn't take long for the subject of marriage to propose itself. So they set the date and reserve the chapel and contact the minister and order the flowers.

The big night arrives amidst Mother's tears and Dad's grins, and jealous bridesmaids and frightened little flower girls. The candles are lit and the bride's sister butchers two songs; one of them was written by the mother of the bride a week before the wedding. Then the vows are muttered, rings are placed on trembling fingers and the preacher tells the groom to kiss his new wife. Then they sprint up the aisle, each flashing 32 teeth, on the way to the reception.

Friends and well-wishers hug and kiss the bride and roll their eyes at the groom, eat the awful cake and follow the instructions of the perspiring photographer. Finally, the new Mr. and Mrs. run from the party in a flurry of birdseed and confetti and strike out on their honeymoon. So far the beautiful dream remains intact, but it is living on borrowed time.

Not only is the first night in the hotel less exciting than advertised – but it also turns into a comical disaster. She is exhausted and tense, and he is self-conscious and phony. From the beginning sex is tinged with the threat of possible failure. Their vast expectations about the marital bed lead to disappointment and frustration and fear. Since most human beings have an almost neurotic desire to feel sexually adequate, each partner tends to blame his or her mate for any orgasmic problems, which eventually add a note of anger or resentment to their relationship.

About 3 o'clock on the second afternoon, the new husband gives 10 minutes of thought to the fateful question, "Have I made an enormous mistake?" His silence increases her anxieties, and the seeds of disenchantment are born. Each partner has far too much time to think about the consequences of this new relationship, and they both begin to feel trapped.

Their initial argument is a silly thing. They disagree momentarily over how much money to spend for dinner on the third night of the honeymoon. She wants to go someplace romantic to charge up the atmosphere, and he wants to eat with Ronald McDonald. The flare-up lasts only a few moments and is followed by apologies, but some harsh words have been exchanged, which took the keen edge off the beautiful dream. They will soon learn to hurt each other more efficiently.

Somehow, they make it through the six-day trip and travel home to set up housekeeping together. They the world starts to splinter and disintegrate before their eyes. The next fight is bigger and better than the first; he leaves home for two hours and she calls her mother.

Throughout the first year, they are engaged in a recurring contest of wills, each vying for power and leadership. And in the midst of this tug-of-war, she staggers out of the obstetrician's office with the words ringing in her ears, "I have some good news for you, Mrs. Jones!" If there is anything on earth Mrs. Jones doesn't need right now, it is "good news" from an obstetrician.

From there to the final conflict, we see two disappointed, confused and deeply hurt young people, wondering how it all came about. A little tow-headed lad or a beautiful little princess soon comes into the family. That child and those yet to come may never enjoy the benefits of a stable home. They will be raised by their mother and will always wonder, "Why doesn't Dad live here anymore?"

The picture I have painted does not reflect every young marriage, obviously, but it is representative of far too many of them. The divorce rate is higher in America than in any other civilized nation in the world, and it is rising. In the case of our disillusioned young couple, what happened to their romantic dream? How did the relationship that began with such enthusiasm turn so quickly into resentment and hostility? They could not have been more enamored with each other in the beginning, but their "happiness" blew up in their startled faces. Why didn't it last? How can others avoid the same unpleasant surprise?

To help clarify this often tragic misunderstanding, I developed a 10-point quiz for use in teaching groups of teenagers. But to my surprise, I found that adults didn't score much higher on the quiz than their adolescent offspring. You may want to take this quiz to measure your understanding of romance, love and marriage. Let me share two the True/False statements to help you discover for yourself the difference between distorted love and the real thing. We'll start with this one:

**Item 1. Love at first sight occurs between some people.**

While there are undoubtedly some differences of opinions regarding the answers for the True/False quiz, I believe there is a valid rationale for the conclusions I have drawn. Like it or not, this first item is *False*. Love at first sight, in fact, an intellectual and emotional impossibility. Why? Because love is not simply a feeling of romantic excitement; it goes beyond intense sexual attraction; it exceeds the thrill at having "captured" a highly desirable prize. These are emotions that are unleashed at first sight, but they

*do not constitute love.* I wish every young couple understood that fact. These temporary feelings differ from love in that they place the spotlight on the one experiencing them. “What is happening to *me*? This is the most fantastic thing *I’ve* ever been through! I think I am in love!”

You see, these emotions are selfish in the sense that they are motivated by a person’s own gratification. They have little to do with the new lover. Such a person has not fallen in love with another human being; *he or she has fallen in love with love!* And there is an enormous difference between the two.

Pop songs, which are many teenagers’ primary source of information about love, reveal a vast ignorance of the topic. One immortal number from yesteryear asserted, “Before the dance was through, I knew I was in love with you.” I wonder if the crooner was quite so confident the next morning. Another confessed, “I didn’t know just what to do so I whispered ‘I love you!’” That one still gets to me. The idea of basing a lifetime commitment on teenage confusion seems a bit shaky at best.

*The Partridge Family* recorded a song years ago that also betrayed a lack of understanding of real love; it said, “I woke up in love this morning, went to sleep with you on my mind.” Love in this sense is nothing more than a frame of mind – and it’s just about that permanent. Finally, a rock group from the ‘60s called *The Doors* took the prize for the most ignorant musical number of the twentieth century; the chorus ran, “Hello, I love you. Won’t you tell me your name!”

Did you know that the idea of marriage based on romantic affection is a rather recent development in human affairs? Centuries ago, parents in most parts of the world arranged the marriages of brides and grooms. It never occurred to anyone that they were supposed to “fall in love.” Who knew what in the world that meant, anyway? In fact, the concept of romantic love was actually popularized by William Shakespeare.

Real love, in contrast to popular notions is an expression of the deepest appreciation for another person; it is an intense awareness of his or her needs and longings for the past, present and future. It is unselfish and giving and caring. And believe me, these are not attitudes one “falls” into at first sight, as though tumbling into a ditch.

I have developed a lifelong love for my wife, Shirley, but it was not something I fell into. I *grew* into it, and that process took time. I had to know her before I could appreciate the depth and stability of her character – to become acquainted with the nuances of her personality, which I now cherish. The familiarity from which love has blossomed simply could not be generated on “some enchanted evening . . . across a crowded room” (as another old crooner would have it). One cannot love an unknown object, regardless of how attractive or sexy or nubile it is!

## **Item 2. It is easy to distinguish real love from infatuation.**

Again, this statement is *False*. The wild ride at the start of a romantic adventure bears all the earmarks of a lifetime trip. Just try to tell a 16-year old dreamer that he is not really in love – that he’s merely

infatuated. He'll whip out his guitar and sing you a song about "true love". He knows what he feels and he feels great. But he'd better enjoy the roller-coaster ride while it lasts, because it has a predictable end point.

I must stress this fact with the greatest emphasis: The exhilaration of infatuation is *never* a permanent condition. Period! If you expect to live on the top of that mountain year after year, you can forget it! Emotions swing from high to low to high in cyclical rhythm; and because romantic excitement is an emotion, it too will certainly oscillate. If the thrill of sexual encounter is identified as genuine love, then disillusionment and disappointment are already knocking at the door.

How many vulnerable young couples "fall in love with love" on the first date – and lock themselves into marriage before the natural swing of their emotions has even progressed through the first dip? Then they awaken one morning without that neat feeling and conclude that love has died. In reality, it was never there in the first place. They were fooled by an emotional "high".

I was trying to explain this oscillating characteristic of our psychological nature to a group of 100 young married couples. During the discussion period, someone asked a young man in the group why he got married so young, and he replied, "Cause I didn't know 'bout the wiggly line until it was too late!" Also, that wiggly line has trapped more than one young romanticist.

The "wiggly line" is manipulated up and down by the circumstances of life. Even when a man and woman love each other deeply and genuinely, they will find themselves supercharged on one occasion and emotionally bland on another. You see, their love is not defined by the highs and lows, but it is a dependent *on a commitment of their will*. Stability comes from this irrepressible determination to make a success of marriage and to keep the flame aglow *regardless of the circumstances*. Good feelings are nice, but they are like the caboose on a train. They are designed to follow, not lead. The engine is what moves it down the track, and it is called "Determination."

*Excerpted from Dr. Dobson's book, Head Over Heels. Used by Permission.*

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Let's return to the question before us: If genuine love is rooted in a commitment of the will, how can one know when it arrives? How can it be distinguished from temporary infatuation? How can the feeling be interpreted if it is unreliable and inconstant?

There is one answer to those questions: *It takes time*. The best advice I can give a couple contemplating marriage (or any other important decision) is this: Make no important, life-shaping decision quickly or impulsively; and when in doubt, stall until you can clear your head. That's not a bad suggestion for all of us to apply.

Considering the rising incidence of marital discord in our families, especially among younger couples, it is obvious that something is seriously wrong. Why are so many husbands and wives quickly wounded,

disillusioned and angry? I believe it is primarily because our entertainment industry and our culture misinform people about the meaning of their own emotions. Expectations are sky high and they cannot be met. They don't understand the truth until it is much too late.

This is why I have devoted my letter this month, and my book, to this topic. Every couple should be told before marriage that exhilaration is never constant, that a marital partner will not be perfect, and, alas, will probably even be generously flawed (aren't we all?) and that the maintenance of good relationships will most certainly require huge quantities of selflessness, giving, forgiving, and patience. It is also essential to pray together every day. If we can get across those understandings before couples meet at the altar, we might begin to see much more stability in this wonderful institution called marriage.

*Note: with the limitations of space available in this letter, I have to refer you to Head Over Heels to read the other eight Q&A items in the quiz. Clever, huh?*

For those of you whose marriages are already in trouble, I urge you not to give up on one another. Lifelong love is God's design for humankind. It isn't easy to maintain, and it takes a ton of work. But when it is right it is wonderful. The guidelines that make it successful are found in the Owner's Manual, given to us by Jehovah Himself.

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