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## A Phenomenological Study of Falling Out of Romantic Love

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## A Phenomenological Study of Falling Out of Romantic Love

### Abstract

Romantic love is considered a necessary ingredient in marriage. In this study, the experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse was examined. Eight individuals who had fallen out of romantic love with their spouse were interviewed. By using Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenological method, several themes emerged which provided a description of the experience of the phenomena. These themes included loss of trust, of intimacy, and of feeling loved; emotional pain; and negative sense of self. Gradual decline was identified as a slow, progressive deterioration of the relationship in which over time the romantic love decreased and eventually ended. Pivotal moment of knowing was seen as a specific moment in which there was awareness of no longer being in romantic love. The specific circumstances associated with pivotal moment were different for each participant, but the clarity of the moment was universal. Although not exhaustive in their scope, the identified themes were reported to be a part of the romantic love dissolution experience.

### Keywords

Moustakas, Phenomenology, Love Dissolution, Romantic

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## A Phenomenological Study of Falling Out of Romantic Love

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*Romantic love is considered a necessary ingredient in marriage. In this study, the experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse was examined. Eight individuals who had fallen out of romantic love with their spouse were interviewed. By using Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenological method, several themes emerged which provided a description of the experience of the phenomena. These themes included loss of trust, of intimacy, and of feeling loved; emotional pain; and negative sense of self. Gradual decline was identified as a slow, progressive deterioration of the relationship in which over time the romantic love decreased and eventually ended. Pivotal moment of knowing was seen as a specific moment in which there was awareness of no longer being in romantic love. The specific circumstances associated with pivotal moment were different for each participant, but the clarity of the moment was universal. Although not exhaustive in their scope, the identified themes were reported to be a part of the romantic love dissolution experience.*

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In the culture of the United States, there is a belief that romantic love is involved in the process of a couple dating, becoming engaged, and marrying (Berscheid, 1988; de Munck, & Korotayev, 2007; Hatfield & Rapson, 2009; Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007). Falling in love seems to be an occurrence that happens at least once to most North Americans at some point in their lives (Hatfield & Rapson 2002; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). Selecting a mate and falling in love is seen as a developmental task and considered normal for most late adolescents and young adults. United States culture endorses and promotes romantic love (Dion & Dion, 1993; Jackson, Chen, Guo, & Gao, 2006; Zhang & Kline, 2009). As a general rule we are to select a mate, marry, and live together for the rest of our lives (Medora, Larson, Hortacsu, & Dave, 2002).

Some anthropologists and social psychologists report that love is universal and not limited to certain cultures (de Munck, Korotayev, de Munck, & Khaltourina, 2011; Hatfield & Rapson, 2002; Vangelisti & Perlman, 2006). The idea that one must remain in-love (Dion & Dion, 1993) or that romantic love is to last a lifetime also prevails (Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007; Fisher, 2006; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002). Romantic love is even thought to thrive in some enduring, long-term relationships (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). Studies have also found the belief that love is necessary to maintain a marriage (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Dion & Dion, 1993). The beliefs that love should be a basis of marriage and true love lasts forever are two of several beliefs about love included in a larger belief system known as "romantic ideology" (Regan, 2012; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002). However, Simpson et al. found the belief that love is necessary for the maintenance of marriage, to be lower in their 1984 research sample than in their 1976 sample. This could suggest that romantic ideologies may be fluid rather than set and may change over time. In addition, we still know very little about love in long term marriages (Hatfield, Pillemer, O'Brien, & Le, 2008).

Divorce or marital dissolution, has been recognized as one of the most widespread social phenomena of the last few decades. In the United States, approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2010). In addition, both the number of divorces and the divorce rate increased at a rapid pace until the early 1980s, when they stabilized at a high level (Tzeng, 1992). Today, one of every two

couples that marry is expected to divorce. The result of low marital satisfaction may lead to divorce (Dew & Wilcox, 2011) which may create a domino effect resulting in single heads of household which may negatively affect children (Doyle, Markiewics, Brendgen, Liberman, & Voss, 2000) and families (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000,). As a result, a larger systemic impact can be experienced by the criminal justice system and state economies, as there can be an increase in the rates of unwed adolescent pregnancy and high school dropout rates (Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001).

### **Romantic Love**

To understand falling out of romantic love, or love dissolution, there needs to be an understanding of the term romantic love.

Romantic love is a passionate spiritual-emotional-sexual attachment between a man and a woman that reflects a high regard for the value of each other's person. I do not describe a relationship as romantic love if the couple does not experience their attachment as passionate or intense, at least to some significant extent. I do not describe a relationship as romantic love if there is not some experience of spiritual affinity, some deep mutuality of values and outlook, some sense of being "soul mates"; if there is not deep emotional involvement; if there is not a strong sexual attraction. And if there is not mutual admiration-if, for example, there is mutual contempt instead-again I do not describe the relationship as romantic love. (Branden, 1980, p. 3)

According to Branden, this is the kind of love that brings out the very best in people.

Romantic love is known by many names, "passionate love," "erotic love," "Eros," and being "in love" (Berscheid, 2010). According to Maslow love is one of four basic human needs (physiological, safety, love, and esteem). The love need must be satisfied before a person can act unselfishly. We need to feel loved. Maslow called these needs "deficiency needs." As long as we are motivated to satisfy these cravings, we are moving toward growth and self-actualization. Maslow saw the satisfaction of needs as healthy (Gwynne, 1997).

Berscheid and Walster are generally credited with having developed the first social psychology model of love (Fehr, 2001). They proposed a model in which love is divided into two categories: passionate love and compassionate love. Passionate love is characterized by physiological arousal, sexual attraction, extremes of emotion, and instability (Berscheid, 1983, 1988). This could be characteristic of the falling in romantic love experience. Companionate love is described as being affection and tenderness. This kind of love also is referred to as friendship love and is based on a foundation of trust, respect, honesty, caring, and commitment. Emotions associated with this kind of love are calm, pleasant, and steady. This type of love could be the next set of building blocks for a long-term relationship. However, although romantic love is often spoken of as if it were an emotion, it could be regarded as a state or condition as it lasts longer than a single emotional experience (Berscheid, 2010). In addition to the emotions, there are also behaviors that are associated with romantic love.

Another romantic love theory, Sternberg's (1988) triangular theory of love, contained three components: passion, intimacy, and decision/commitment. Intimacy referred to close, connected, and bonded feelings in a loving relationship. Passion referred to drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation in a loving relationship. The decision/commitment component consisted of long and short-term decisions that include the decision to love someone and the decision to maintain that love. Romantic love is considered

by Sternberg to be a combination of intimacy and passion. According to Sternberg, couples must work at building and rebuilding their loving relationships. "Relationships are constructions, and they decay over time if they are not maintained and improved" (p. 138).

Aron, Paris, and Aron's (1995) self-expansion model of love was another approach to explaining a theory of romantic love. This theory examined motivations for why individuals enter into romantic love relationships. The main concept for this theory was that individuals enter into romantic love relationships with the intention of expanding themselves by incorporating aspects of the loved ones' self into one's own self. Aron, et al. explained that relationship phenomena could be understood within this theory. The greater the overlap of the partner or self-expansion of the individual the greater the commitment and satisfaction reported in the relationship (Fehr, 2001).

Many theoretical and empirical studies have focused on the termination of marriage and divorce. Unfortunately, little attention has been given to the topic of falling out of romantic love.

Tzeng (1992) writes that research provides little definitive understanding of the overall phenomenon of love dissolution. Berscheid stated, "It seems likely that the cataloging of putative types of love and inductive psychometric studies have reached their points of diminishing return. New approaches to the study of love are needed" (2010, p. 21). If the contemporary cultural belief is that romantic love is a necessary ingredient for marriage (Hatfield & Rapson, 2009) then perhaps to better understand marriage and divorce, the focus of research should be concentrated on creating a better understanding of the phenomenon of falling out of romantic love. If the statistical and numerical processes have not yielded a greater understanding, than perhaps a qualitative method of research would be beneficial.

## **A Review of the Literature**

"Is love enough to keep you happy? Is there a bottom line? And can there ever be anyone else for you but me? Is love enough to make you mine? I wanna know" (Williams & Richmond, 1977, as sung by the Doobie Brothers).

No research was found that specifically addressed the experience of falling out of romantic love. This literature review covered biological, psychological, and attachment theory perspectives of falling in romantic love; premarital break ups, divorce prediction, marital distress and attachment theory, and romantic love dissolution.

## **Reactions to Romantic Relationship Dissolution**

### **Psychological Reactions**

Much of the literature on love and relationship dissolution focuses on the emotional pain and suffering of the experience (Field, 2011; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006). Research results indicate that losses in life, including marital or relational dissolution, have been identified as major life events (Kendler, Hettema, Butera, Gardner, & Prescott, 2003) which can have numerous negative outcomes including onset of mood disorders (Kendler, Hettema, Butera, Gardner, & Prescott, 2003; Mearns, 1991; Rosenthal, 2002) and complicated grief symptoms (Field, 2011; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009). This has been found to be true for both adults and adolescents (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). Following a relationship break up, individuals report post relationship affective experiences including love, sadness, and anger (Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006).

Relationship break ups that occur prior to marriage can result in a lowering of life satisfaction. This is especially true for couples that cohabitated or had plans to marry

(Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). The emotional distress experienced in premarital romantic relationships following a relationship breakup was affected by close the individual felt to their former partner, if they had dated the former partner for a long time, and did the individual believe a new partner would be difficult to acquired. Those that found these criteria to be true, tended to experience more pronounced distress following dissolution (Simpson, 1987).

Rejection in romantic relationships is said to be so painful that people are not only in extreme emotional pain but so much so that they can no longer function (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Romantic relationship rejection can result in an intense sense of loss and induce clinical levels of depressed mood and in extreme cases result in suicidal or homicidal behaviors (Fisher, Brown, Aron, Strong, & Mashek, 2010).

### **Gender Differences**

Although gender differences on break up distress are rarely identified in the research, (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009), women report more severe depression and hopelessness than men. Women are also twice as likely to experience depression. However, men are three to four times more likely to commit suicide after a romantic rejection (Mearns, 1991; Ustun & Sartorius, 1995). Males who demonstrated Agape, self-less caring love, and Mania, obsessive and jealous, love styles had greater levels of emotional distress following a relationship break up than females (Hammock & Richardson, 2011).

Both men and women report higher levels of depression, loss of self-esteem and intrusive thoughts following a break up if they felt rejected and or betrayed by their partner (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009; Perilloux & Bus, 2008). Factors such as which partner initiated the break up, time since the break up occurred, and not yet dating again, appear to make a difference in post-relational dissolution adjustment. In addition, if the relationship breakup was sudden and unexpected, then the individual would demonstrate higher levels of distress as well (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009).

### **Physical Reactions of Relationship Dissolution**

**Broken heart syndrome.** Physical distress associated with a romantic relationship loss has also been reported. Following a romantic break-up some individuals have described physical pain in the heart or chest area. This phenomena known as Broken Heart Syndrome appears to mimic an actual heart attack (Field, 2011). The norepinephrine and epinephrine levels are elevated but the cardiac enzymes that are normally released during an actual heart attack are not present (Wittstein et al. 2005). However, broken heart syndrome has been differentiated from a true physical heart attack as angiograms reveal unclogged arteries and no permanent heart damage results (Field, 2011).

**Post – traumatic stress symptoms.** Relationship break up reactions may present as post-traumatic stress symptoms (Chun et al., 2002). In addition, relationship dissolution can result in a great deal of emotional distress (Amato, 2000) which can be demonstrated through patterns of behavior such as preoccupation with the lost partner, perseveration over the loss, physical and emotional distress, and exaggerated attempts to reestablish the relationship have been found to occur as a reaction to relational dissolution. Even angry and vengeful behavior along with dysfunctional coping strategies has been identified in some individuals when they have lost someone they love to a relationship break-up (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). The impact of relationship dissolution was also found to have long-lasting effects (Chung et al., 2003).

Each study reviewed used a particular methodology that was appropriate for the specific research question. However, no research study reviewed examined the experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse. The lived experience has not yet been captured or identified within the scholarly or scientific literature.

### **Method**

My interest in learning and understanding more about the phenomena of falling out-of-romantic love with one's spouse was a direct result of experiences that arose during psychotherapy sessions in my private practice. As a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist since 1991, I had worked with numerous couples and individuals who presented with marital and relationship problems. Yet, the question that continued to be asked by my clients, to which I had no response was "I've fallen out of love with my spouse; how does that happen?" Many of my client's expressed beliefs that love had to be present in order to have marital qualitative; and for some to even continue the marriage.

I began looking in the published literature to identify research that would provide insight into the process and experience of a married partner falling out of love. Although I found numerous articles addressing divorce and relationship breakups and their impact and outcomes, there was very little information regarding falling out of romantic love. It appeared that no research had been conducted using a qualitative research design that focused on the lived experience of individuals falling out of romantic love with their marital partner.

During this time, I entered into a doctoral program in Psychology with a specialization in Family Psychology. When considering an appropriate topic for my dissertation, I knew falling out of romantic love with one's spouse would be the most beneficial research project I could undertake. Since I use language on a daily basis as a Therapist, I wanted to use a research method that would also use language. I decided on a qualitative phenomenological research method.

Although I did not use any of my current client's as research participants, I had no difficulty obtaining participants who were both interested in this topic and who had experienced the phenomena being researched. I undertook this research topic in order to be able to better understand the phenomena of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse and to be able to respond to my client's questions. In addition, I hoped to learn about preventative methods that would help marital couples prior to the loss of love within their relationship. I wanted to answer the question, What is the lived experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse?

By using phenomenological inquiry, this research sought to obtain information and understanding of the phenomenon of falling out of romantic love. Through the use of interview, observation, and documentation, the goal was to gain knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon. Gaining information regarding spousal romantic love dissolution could lead to intervention techniques that could benefit married couples and families.

### **Rationale for Qualitative, Phenomenological Investigation**

Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for studying process because portraying the experience of process requires detailed description of how people engage with one another (Patton, 2002); the various experiences can be captured with direct quotes (Van Manen, 1990); and process requires obtaining the perception of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Quantitative data cannot provide the essence of the experience. This is a search for the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience. "Phenomenology aims at

gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Phenomenology focuses on how people make sense of their experiences and the world; how they develop a worldview; make sense of experience and transforms experience into consciousness (Patton, 2002). Phenomenological research must be obtained from individuals who have "lived experience" (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

The qualitative model of data collection and analysis allows for a small sample size (Barker, Elliott, & Pistrang, 2004) because a unique and individual experience is being studied. For this research, 8 research participants were sought. They were chosen based on their interest in the research, their diversity with respect to age (27 to 74 years, with a mean age of 50.5 year), gender, (four females and four males) and their having knowledge of the phenomenon being researched due to their own personal experience of such phenomenon. Research participants were selected based on their having experienced the phenomenon fully and in sufficient amounts so that they were able to recall, discuss, and articulate their experience. All the research candidates met the following criteria (a) an individual that at some time in their adult life have been legally married, (b) this individual experienced the phenomenon of being in romantic love with their spouse, and (c) at some time during the marriage, experienced the phenomenon of no longer being in romantic love with their spouse.

Detailed interviews were conducted with the same eight participants, and these interviews were held at the researcher's office. The interviews were audio-taped, lasting 60 to 90 ninety minutes. The audio-tapes were later transcribed. Interviewer notes were taken following the interview. Participants documented their experience in an Intensive Journal for two weeks prior to the interview, and brought in any cards, letters, old journals, poems, songs, drawings, or any other documentation regarding their experience of falling out of romantic love with their spouse. The general interview guide approach was utilized, as it was conversational and situational. Although the questions were created in advance, there was flexibility to pursue the topic at greater depth. The collecting of direct quotes through the written documentation and audio transcription was beneficial in the analysis and reporting of results phases. This provided what Giorgi (2002) describes as gathering an awareness of the "lived sense" of an individual's experience.

## **Data Analysis**

Once the data were collected, they were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model. This included epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, synthesis of texture and structure, and an integration step of essence (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002, Royce-Davis, 2001). Epoché requires the suspension of judgment and viewing the phenomena with a newness and openness as if "seeing" from a fresh vantage point. This required the researcher to create a shift in attitude and perception that result in seeing the investigated experience in a different way other than the everyday understanding. Prejudices, assumptions, and viewpoints regarding the phenomena were removed or at least realized by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction has the goal of reducing textural meanings or the "what" of experience and structural meanings or the "how" of an experience to a brief description that typifies the experience of a phenomenon for all of the participants in a study. Because all individuals experience the phenomenon in some form, it is a reduction to the "essentials" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). There were three steps within phenomenological reduction: bracketing, horizontalization, and cluster of meaning. The first step was bracketing, which involved recognizing and setting aside preconceived notions in order to most fully understand the experience "no longer in romantic love". Bracketing the topic or question also required the focus of the research to be placed in brackets; everything else was set aside so



that the entire research process was rooted solely on the topic and primary research question. In the second step, "horizontalization", every significant statement made in relation to the experience of "no longer in romantic love" was listed and given equal value or consideration. Statements irrelevant to the topic or question as well as those that were repetitive or overlapping were deleted, leaving only the horizons. Delimiting horizons or meanings were the horizons that stood out as invariant qualities of the experience and created the meaning units.

The third step in phenomenological analysis involved creating clusters of meanings. Statements were clustered into themes or meaning units, and overlapping, repetitive, or unsupported statements were removed (Moustakas, 1994; Royce-Davis, 2001; Van Manen, 1990). Out of the meaning units surfaced textural themes (see Table 1) which included loss, emotional pain, negative sense of self, gradual decline, and pivotal moment of knowing. A textural description was developed from the clustered themes for each participant.

The step following phenomenological reduction is imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Here the invariant themes within the data were identified. Through imaginative variation, the researcher developed enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes (Patton, 2002). By using what Moustakas (1994) referred to as Imagination Variation, the goal was to imagine or seek out all possible meanings of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse. By looking at the phenomenon from various angles, positions, or perspectives anything becomes possible. Universal Structures which included time, space, relationship to self, relationship to others, and causality were applied to the textural themes in order to develop the individual structures (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181). Moustakas recommends the use Universal Structures such as "time, space, relationship to self, to others; bodily concerns, causal or intentional structures" (p. 181) in the development of structures. Through using the Universal Structures, Structural descriptions were created for each participant.

A textural description and structural synthesis were written in the next step of data analysis. Using the enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes, the researcher identified detailed insight into the meaning that individuals have experienced, about the topic under study (Moustakas, 1994; Royce-Davis, 2001). A textural description provided detailed insight into the meaning that individuals have experienced about the topic "no longer in romantic love". The textural portrayal was an abstraction of the experience. It provided content and illustration, but not the essence (Patton, 2002). The invariant meaning units and themes were organized into textural descriptions. These included quotes and verbatim passages from the research participants. The textural descriptions were then used to expand on the imaginative variation and develop a structure of the experience, thus creating structural descriptions. The structural synthesis required the researcher to go deeper than the intrinsic effect of the experience and into the "deeper meaning" (Moustakas; Patton).

Next, a textural-structural description was created from the textural and structural descriptions for each interview. The textural description and the structural description come together to create a greater description, comprehension, and understanding of the experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse. This synthesis of data enables the reader to have greater insight into *what* was experienced with *how* it was experienced. A composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a composite textural-structural synthesis were then developed from the data. Out of the synthesis, the essence of the lived experience emerged. The essence reflects a particular experience of the individuals interviewed (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

To ensure credibility, the researcher developed an individual synthesis of the data for each participant and sent it to the participant to determine if the synthesis was a valid representation of his or her lived experience. All participants that responded to the member

checking agreed with the synthesis. Based on participant feedback, no additions or changes were made.

### Findings

According to Chenail (1995) the data is to be presented in a simple format. Chenail writes, "Does it sound simple? Well, that's the idea with qualitative research...because in qualitative research the complexity is in the data" (p. 1).

Table 1. Textural Themes with verbatim quotations from the participants

Textural Themes	Verbatim Quotations from the Participants
Loss	<p><b>Intimacy:</b></p> <p>"The bedroom and our sex life is a reflection of everything else in our relationship."</p> <p>"I didn't feel like I could succeed at that because if I did try it or do it, it wouldn't be good enough or be the way she wanted, and she didn't want to have sex anymore."</p> <p>"...during sex there was no kissing. I remember just craving to be kissed, but not by him."</p> <p>"Realizing that here I am loving this person with everything I've got. If I had it, I'd give it to him, but yet in return, he gives nothing."</p> <p><b>Trust:</b></p> <p>"Well after all this hit me...now I can't rely on him to take care of everything. I have to do it. It's hard to take care of what you have to do now and fix everything when he takes all the income and blows it, so I've got to find other ways to do that."</p> <p>"...when you're just together [without romantic love], and you may have that sense of comfort, but you don't have reliability. You don't care. You don't care to rely on them. They don't care to rely on you. Trust is usually gone by that point as well. If it's not completely gone, it's working. It's on its way out..."</p> <p>"That [loss of trust] right there has diminished everything. It's the trust. If I can't trust you, I don't want to have that relationship with you. Trust is a big part of a relationship with me, especially a romantic relationship."</p> <p>"If you can lie to a person, how are you going to fix that? That's just being completely dishonest, which you're already diminishing your marriage as it is."</p>

	<p>"The trust ... starts going away. You start wondering, 'what are they doing? Are they being honest with me?' I hate feeling that. I hate thinking that. I want to be able to trust him. I used to trust him."</p> <p>"Now I don't trust anything he does. He can tell me one thing, but unless you show me proof, 'Whatever. You're lying to me.' That's what it's like. Not very pleasant anyway."</p> <p>"Now I question everything."</p> <p><b>Feeling Loved:</b></p> <p>"... I'm not so sure she had the ability to love anybody..."</p> <p>"... but she didn't love me because you just don't treat somebody that bad ..."</p> <p>"...I just don't see how somebody can be in love with somebody, but yet don't care what happens to them..."</p> <p>"My love is disappearing; my heart feels like he is stepping all over it and he does not seem to care."</p>
<b>Emotional Pain</b>	<p>"The pain is so overwhelming."</p> <p>"Yes, it was the depression...I had a deep desire to associate, but the cost, the emotional cost, was more than I was willing to pay at that time. I was spent."</p> <p>"Pain truly is the touchstone to growth...I had no idea that I was having that much pain (crying)."</p> <p>"Yes, it was the depression caused by profound loneliness."</p> <p>"I went through a grieving period...."</p> <p>"But, there were periods of time that I felt very lonely, just tremendously lonely."</p> <p>"That's miserable. You hurt. It almost feels like your heart's been trampled on a little too many times."</p> <p>"... I just crashed."</p> <p>"...I think I cried for a year."</p> <p>"The pain is so overwhelming. I didn't want suicide. That didn't enter my mind, but you want to have relief of the pain you feel."</p> <p>"You have to understand, we just fell out of love...it was just that hurt there."</p>

	<p>"... but I don't think I ever will be able to feel that [romantic love] again because it [the pain] was pretty drastic."</p> <p>"Falling out of romantic love was for me more like dropping out of the sky-on to pavement."</p>
<b>Negative Sense of Self</b>	<p>"I felt like a failure because I couldn't own up to my vows."</p> <p>"I was already feeling damaged enough, so my self-esteem was... practically non-existent."</p> <p>"My personality had been rejected by...It changed me permanently... I stopped believing in romantic love...I spent several years with no personality at all."</p> <p>"It changed me permanently."</p> <p>"...I stopped believing in romantic love...."</p> <p>"I was a miserable person to be around..."</p> <p>"So I think that how you view your life and your circumstances that if you're not happy with yourself, how in the world could you be happy with anybody? You know, you could be married to a saint, and if you're not happy with yourself, you're going to be miserable...So, yeah I definitely think that your fulfillment in life affects the romantic love."</p> <p>"I was in that funk with trying to come to realizations with the new dream. When you're not a happy person, then everything else around you suffers, especially...romantic love."</p> <p>"It was a saddening feeling. It was like thinking, "Gee. This isn't the [self] that used to be. This isn't the [husband] that used to be. This isn't the marriage I envisioned us to have...so it was very sad..."</p> <p>"I guess sometimes I just dressed not sloppy but careless."</p> <p>"So in other words, I didn't have the self-image."</p> <p>"I had started to nurture myself with food and let myself kind of go in that sense. I gained a lot of weight..."</p> <p>"I was already feeling damaged enough, so my self-esteem was not... It was practically non-existent during the three years..."</p>
<b>Gradual Decline</b>	<p>"So, it was a combination of these little things that started making me think."</p>

	<p>"I think it took some time."</p> <p>"It was a separation that started and took time."</p> <p>"... I kind of fell out of romantic love over a period of time."</p> <p>"It ultimately compounded to just a complete decline in the relationship."</p> <p>"I think that possibly you could look at love like...it either grows or it diminishes...or it just sits still and dissipates or gets cold or goes away."</p> <p>"These small things started adding up to, really, I see a future where things are not going to happen for her the way she has painted."</p> <p>"I would say that there were maybe changes which occurred in phases, and if I was going to categorize those changes, they probably occurred about five years apart."</p> <p>"I mean, we were realizing that it was 20 years down the road and we were vastly changed people and didn't think that we would each turn out the way the other did or something. I had expectations and hopes for our marriage, and she didn't share them. She had expectations and hopes that I didn't share."</p> <p>"... there were some signs that I should have picked up on but didn't, and it ultimately compounded to just a complete decline in the relationship."</p> <p>"Well, it wasn't an overnight thing. It was just some elements that I had overlooked or let go that compounded as we went along in our marriage."</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moment of Knowing</b></p>	<p>"And I think at that moment it was like a stick just snapped. It was over. It was flat done. There was no going back...It's like breaking your spine. It doesn't heal. This was not going to heal."</p> <p>"Up until that very moment, the gathering negativity has not coalesced, has not congealed, but at that instant...in that moment, it became very crystal clear like a lucid thought about what was happening."</p> <p>"It's a strange thing with me. When I'm done, I'm done. I still can be with you and respect the institution of the marriage, but my heart is not in it no more."</p> <p>"...but the romantic love—I don't know—I just accepted that it was gone."</p> <p>"He felt like a stranger to me... I knew right then. I was like, 'I don't</p>

	<p>love this man other than the fact that he is the father of my children...when I really said to myself,</p> <p>“I do not love this man,” was in that moment. "</p> <p>"The romantic love had died."</p>
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### Composite Textural–Structural Description of All Participant Interviews

The composite textural-structural description was created out of a synthesis of the entire research participant's individual textural and structural descriptions. The meaning units and themes of all participants were examined in order to represent the experiences of the group as a whole. The composite textural-structural description represents the essence of the experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse.

Loss of key components within the relationship resulted in a decrease in the romantic love. Trust was experienced as an important part of a romantic love relationship. The loss of trust impacted the relationship to such a degree that it diminished the feelings of love. Loss of feeling loved within the relationship also resulted in a decrease in loving feelings for the romantic partner. A lack of intimacy was viewed as a reflection of the larger relationship. Loss of intimacy refers to the absence of emotional and physical closeness between husband and wife. Both the emotional and physical intimacy associated with romantic love was ending. There were no more stolen moments of intimacy or passionate kisses; instead finding creative ways to avoid potential intimacy became the new challenge. Strategies such as "using the children as an excuse to not even get into bed with him" were developed to successfully avoid intimate behavior. Even fatigue was a valid reason not to be intimate. "I'm tired at night. That's the last thing I want to do." Eventually intimacy was no longer even initiated. The loss of ease and desire for intimacy clearly signaled a falling out of romantic love experience. Loss of trust, feeling loved, and intimacy decreased the feelings of romantic love in general.

Emotional pain was experienced as overwhelming with feelings of depression, sadness, and loneliness. The emotional pain of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse was intense, penetrating, and unrelenting. Without the romantic love, the only thing remaining was the pain. Emotional pain extended to the depths of their being. There was grief over the loss of what was once wonderful, happy, and exciting romantic love. The grief mixed with depression and isolation. The emotional pain of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse could be summarized as, "I think you only can realize how good it [romantic love] is when you can realize how bad it is. Pain truly is the touchstone to growth...I had no idea that I was having that much pain (crying)."

Sense of self and relation to self were clearly altered by the falling out of romantic love experience. Sense of self refers to a collective description of self in terms of esteem, image, and identity. Feeling badly about one's self radiated outward and touched everything, including romantic love. "I felt like a failure." Sense of self withers from lack of romantic sustenance. Sense of self was so profoundly intertwined with romantic love that as one diminished so did the other. The lack of nurturance through romantic love leads to over eating, weight gain, and not caring about one's appearance. Falling out of romantic love resulted in a personal sense of rejection that struck the core of self so powerfully that it was completely altered. Depression, isolation, and loneliness implode within one's self. Awareness of how sense of self and romantic love had plummeted resulted in intense emotions of deep sadness. Relation to self was altered in such a dramatic manner that there were long-term effects. "It changed me permanently...I stopped believing in romantic love."

Gradual decline refers to a slow, methodical, and progressive deterioration of the relationship between husband and wife over time in which the romantic love decreases and eventually ends. Time plays a role in measuring the changes in the romantic love throughout the falling out of romantic love with one's spouse process. The influence of time can be understood through reflection. The gradual, barely visible changes that damaged romantic love could not be seen in the moment in which they occurred. Only by looking back could the contrast between romantic love *then* and romantic love *now* be made. Gradual decline resulted initially from a collection of subtle, almost imperceptible changes in the relationship. These seemingly small things began to compound and wedge themselves in between husband and wife. They separated the couple from the romantic love gradually over time. These small, unseen changes continue to grow day-by-day. Until these barely discernible alterations become obtrusive obstacles so large that they can no longer be denied. Causative factors of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse are criticism, frequent arguments, jealousy, financial problems, incompatible beliefs, control, abuse, loss of trust, lack of intimacy, emotional pain, negative sense of self, contempt, feeling unloved, fear, and infidelity. As these factors grew, they eventually became large scale destructive experiences that ultimately depleted the romantic love. The loss of romantic love through gradual decline could be summarized as, "I think that possibly you could look at love like...it either grows or it diminishes...or it just sits still and dissipates or gets cold or goes away."

The pivotal moment of knowing, was a specific, recognizable, and definable moment in time in which there is certain, unmistakable awareness of no longer being in romantic love. The pivotal moment of knowing represented an easily discernible, easily identifiable instantaneous revelation in which there is unquestionable knowledge that the romantic love for one's spouse has vanished. The perceptions and descriptions of pivotal moment of knowing were intense and did not diminish with the passage of time. The pivotal moment of knowing clearly marked the end of romantic love. The specific circumstances associated with pivotal moment were different for each participant, but the clarity of the moment was universal. Pivotal moment of knowing provided the awareness of the precise moment when the participant realized he or she was no longer in romantic love with their spouse. "The romantic love had ended".

## **The Essence**

The results of the previous integration step led to the development of a description of how the phenomenon was experienced by individuals in the study. This represents a synthesis of the essences of falling out of love for the participants. Essence consists of the fundamental, necessary qualities that make an experience what it is. Describing an experience requires the use of language that can convey meaning. Language is a cultural, social experience that carries a commonly understood set of meanings, beliefs, values, and traditions that use words as symbols (Aita, McIlvain, Susman, & Crabtree, 2003).

Qualitative research uses language as data and thus reporting the essence of a phenomenological study through the use of a metaphorical description seemed an appropriate fit. "...metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 12).

It was through the immersion within the data that I became aware of the symbols, words, and metaphors used by the participants to convey their meaning. Since the very concept on which this research is based, "falling out of love" is a metaphor, it seemed appropriate to create a metaphorical description to convey the core of the experience. Using a metaphorical description by which to report the essence of the experience of falling out of

romantic love with one's spouse allowed me to deepen my understanding of the experience of the participants. By taking their words and transforming them into a metaphorical description I was able to create a presentation of the essence that speaks to the heart of the experience. A powerful metaphor can convey a great deal of meaning (Patton, 2002). Metaphors illuminate experiences (Carpenter, 2008). The following is a metaphorical description of what falling out of romantic love was like for the participants in this research.

What is the experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse? Falling out of romantic love with one's spouse is like the sensation of falling. A spouse is blamed for the fall. A pushing away through loss of trust slowly nudges one closer toward the edge. Feeling unloved moves one to the rim. Lack of intimacy shifts the footing almost to the brink. A coalescing of negative sense of self and gradual decline of romantic love finally serves as a direct shove from the spouse causing loss of balance and sending one plummeting over the edge into the abyss below. As one falls there is no control, nothing to reach out and grab, no way to stop. Even when one attempts to break the fall, the branch snaps, the limb breaks, and the fall continues. It is difficult to breathe. The stomach tightens and churns. The heart feels as if it will break or burst. The eyes are squeezed tightly shut so as not to see the fall. It is happening as if in slow motion. There are no senses to indicate the distance up or down, near or far, only wide space all around. The free fall is sickening and even more frightening when one is cognizant of the fall. Pivotal moment of knowing is the sudden, abrupt stop when one hits the ground. It is a sensation of crashing and crushing upon impact. The air is knocked out of one's chest as well as one's heart. As the confusion clears, there is recognition that the fall is over and so is the romantic love that one once knew. Pain is all that remains. It is all encompassing. Everything hurts. There is an anxiety and guardedness that was not there before. There is an empty, hollow, brokenness. The collective sense of self, which includes esteem, image, and identity, is permanently changed, damaged. The crumpled sense of self withers from lack of romantic sustenance as it lies at the bottom of the gorge following the fall. The lack of nurturance sets off an implosion of depression, isolation, and loneliness within one's self. Relation to self is altered in such a dramatic manner that there are long-term effects. "It changed me permanently...I stopped believing in romantic love..." Healing of self is possible, but falling out of romantic love will leave a mark, even a scar.

### **Discussion of Results**

Romantic love has both a psychological and biological component (Buss, 2006; Zeki, 2007). Romantic, passionate love can be described as physiological arousal accompanied by appropriate cognitive cues (Berscheid, 1988). Romantic love is necessary for biological pair bonding as well as for reproduction of the human species (Carter, 1998).

There are four tasks associated with acts of love that are associated with successful reproduction. These tasks usually occur within the following sequence: attract a mate, retain that mate, reproduce with that mate, and invest parentally in the resulting offspring (Buss, 2006). The early stages of romantic, passionate love are characterized by increased energy and focused attention on a preferred mating partner. There are feelings of exhilaration, intrusive thinking about the loved one, and a craving for emotional union with the partner or potential partner (Fisher, Aron, Mashek, Li, & Brown, 2002; Zeki, 2007). These feelings, thoughts, and cravings are brought on by changes in brain activity and peripheral hormonal levels (Schneiderman, Zilberstein-Kra, & Leckman, 2011). There is a complex interplay between hormones and neurotransmitters at work in the human brain during this time. Through the use of fMRIs, researchers have found significant activity in the right ventral tegmental area, a region primarily associated with the production and distribution of dopamine to several other brain regions when observing individuals who are "in love".



These data further suggest that elevated levels of central dopamine and norepinephrine and decreased levels of central serotonin (Fisher et al., 2002; Zeki, 2007) play a central role in the focused attention, motivation, and goal-oriented behaviors associated with romantic love. Feelings of exhilaration and euphoria are experienced as a result of the dopamine being produced in the brain of a person in the throes of love (Zeki, 2007). Dopamine and phenylethylamine work in combination on the reward pathways of the brain that leads from the limbic system to the cerebral cortex (Carter, 1998; Zeki, 2007).

Bonding, both for sexual intimacy and parent-child connectedness are created by the brain hormone, oxytocin (Schneiderman, Zilberstein-Kra, & Leckman, 2011; Zeki, 2007). This chemical is created in the hypothalamus. When released in the brain, oxytocin is known to produce the sensation of satisfaction or gratitude (Freeman, 1995). This bonding may be the chemical basis for what human beings call "love".

People in the throes of this hormonal storm are more than usually divorced from reality, particularly when it comes to making assessments about the person they love. They are famously blind to the other's faults and often wildly over-optimistic about the future of the relationship...romantic love is a chemically induced form of madness. (Carter, 1998, p. 76)

Hormonal changes continue after the falling in love phase and occur throughout pregnancy and even into childrearing. These chemical changes have been noted to occur in animals as the males are around pregnant females. It has been suggested that fathers undergo hormonal changes when he lives beside his pregnant wife and then beside his young children (Brizendine, 2010; Schneider, Fletcher, Shaw, & Renfree, 2010).

Even so, the chemistry of love is thought to "wear off". In Fisher's (2004) study, she noted that passionate attachments are time-bound. She stated that monogamous species form pair-bonds that last long enough to raise the young. Fisher estimated this to be four years in length. Perhaps falling out of romantic love with one's spouse is associated with chemical patterns. Additional research would be needed to determine if this idea holds true.

Although there is a great deal of information regarding the activity of the brain, as measured by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), during the falling in romantic love experience (Zeki, 2007), being in love (Acevedo, Aron, Fisher, & Brown, 2011; Fisher, Aron, & Brown, 2006; Ortigue, Bianchi-Demicheli, Patel, Frum, & Lewis, 2010) as well as those following a romantic break up (Fisher, Brown, Aron, Strong, & Mashek, 2010; Kross, Berman, Mischel, Smith & Wager, 2011), virtually nothing is scientifically known about the chemistry of the brain during the experience of falling out of romantic love. According to Freeman (1995), this may be because the experiences are "too painful and too unique in each lifetime to be subject to experimental repetitions and controls" (p. 124).

The findings of this study on the lived experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse was a significant contribution to the body of knowledge as the literature in this area of marital study is scarce. This research found the themes of loss of trust, intimacy, and feeling loved; emotional pain; and negative sense of self was equally destructive. The theme of gradual decline represented multiple factors that went unaddressed until the final theme, pivotal moment of knowing was experienced and each participant knew he or she had fallen out of romantic love with their spouse.

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

The findings of this study suggest several clinical implications regarding the lived experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse. Therapists need to watch for the

themes identified in this research that are harmful to romantic relationships. Intervention through acknowledging the presence and destructive force of these themes needs to be addressed by informing couples that these themes can erode their romantic love (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002). Since all of the themes had an inter-relational dynamic, romantic couples could benefit from being seen in therapy conjointly. As therapists focus on spousal patterns of interaction, therapists will be more likely to identify destructive themes and begin to shift client behavior away from these patterns (Zuccarini, Johnson, Dalgleish, & Makinen, 2012).

Since distressed couples are distinguished by their rigid structured interactional patterns and intense negative affect (Johnson, 2004), assisting clients in developing healthy emotional regulation could help to decrease the negative focus and flow of emotions that develops when clients begin to report marital distress. Addressing feelings, of loss such as loss of trust, intimacy, and feeling loved could help the clients in understanding their emotions as a “rich source of meaning”. Emotions provide clients with critical information about their world. By learning to understand what their feelings are telling them, clients could also learn to reorganize their emotional responses and create changes in their perception (Johnson, 2004). They may be able to reduce the emotional pain and decrease the experience of falling out of romantic love. Therapists could assist their couple clients in being better able to demonstrate being emotionally available for one another. Helping romantic couple clients express feelings of caring could reduce the theme of feeling unloved. (Johnson, 2004)

Good marital skills, including self-repair, are necessary to prevent or change direction once negative patterns of interaction begin (Fincham, Stanely, & Beach, 2007). Since graduate decline was reported to occur over time, addressing and resolving marital difficulties in a timely manner could serve to decrease graduate decline and perhaps stave off pivotal moment all together.

These clinical implications suggest that marital therapists, psychologists, and other mental health providers that work with couples and families would benefit from recognition of these destructive themes. Intervention to remove these themes before they permanently alter the romantic love to the point that there is irreparable damage is recommended. Intervention to reverse falling out of romantic love with one's spouse would be beneficial for all involved.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In order to create a better understanding of the phenomenon of falling out of romantic love, research should be conducted with couples who have not yet experienced love dissolution. The current research study only looked at individuals who reported having already had the experience. By looking at couples who remain in love yet are in jeopardy of falling out of romantic love greater understanding of how and why this occurs could be identified.

Neither gender nor ethnic differences in the experience of falling out of romantic love were examined in this research. Only heterosexual couple members were interviewed. Expanding the research to include a focus on gender differences, ethnic difference, and same-sex couples might shed additional light on the overall topic of falling out of romantic love. These areas warrant attention and exploration.

Research associated with brain chemistry and falling out of romantic love could provide interesting data. Information regarding the possible role hormones play in this phenomenon could be helpful. If decreases and/or increases in various neurotransmitters are responsible for the feelings of being in love, it may be that these same chemical changes play an important role in the feelings of being no longer in love.

Finally, although this research identified several themes considered to be related to the falling out of romantic love experience, it by no means exhausted the list of possible themes. Research is needed in the area of identifying what additional themes and patterns are destructive to a romantic love relationship.

## Conclusion

In summary, this research study used a qualitative, phenomenological method by which to gain a greater understanding of the lived experience of falling out of romantic love with one's spouse. The identified themes included loss of trust, intimacy, and feeling loved; emotional pain; and negative sense of self. Gradual decline was identified as a slow, progressive deterioration of the relationship in which over time the romantic love decreased and eventually ended. Pivotal moment of knowing was seen as a specific moment in which there was awareness of no longer being in romantic love. The specific circumstances associated with pivotal moment were different for each participant, but the clarity of the moment was universal. Although not exhaustive in their scope, the identified themes were reported to be a part of the romantic love dissolution experience.

To my knowledge, no other study has explored the lived experience of falling out of romantic love. I am hopeful that the clinical implications of this study will assist marriage and family therapists, psychologists, and other mental health providers in better understanding the themes, the destructive nature of these themes if left unchecked, as well as intervention techniques that assist in decreasing the impact these themes have on romantic love.

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