

The Science of Love

Dr. Sue Johnson

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In many ways it is a puzzling emotion, we fall for someone, it feels good, we are happy. But our next guest has found that there is more to love, than meets the art. So joining us now to put love under the microscope is Sue Johnson, the author of Love Sense, the revolutionary new science of romantic relationships. She is also a professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Ottawa. Hello, welcome to the program. OK, I want to start with the subtitle, because it is: "The revolutionary new science of romantic relationships". What is the new science?

Well basically, the new science is that ... it is not new on one level, because about say forty years ago scientist started looking at bonds and bonding and they started with mothers and infants. And actually, what we are not really aware of a lot of times is that their work has revolutionized the way we see kids and the way we parent our kids. We know that kids need love and connection like they need oxygen. But in the last 15 years, we have started to apply all the things they have learned to adult bonding, to romantic relationships. And that is really interesting, because all through history every poet and philosopher and almost anybody has really defined romantic love as a mystery, some sort of strange psychotic mixture of sex and sentiment. But everyone has agreed, that you absolutely can not understand it. It comes along, you fall into it, you fall out of it. It sort of hit you in the head. And you can not understand it. So what is fascinating now, is after only about two decades, we really can say that we understand so much about romantic love. It is not the strange mixture of sex and sentiment, it is really a wired-in, ancient survival code, that is designed to keep a few people that you really trust and that you can depend on close. And that is a whole different way of thinking about it, than sort of, just a kind of sexual friend.

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OK we are going to talk more about a sort of how we are wired and this has sort of bred in us. But you say, we sort of agreed on what love is? Society broadly has not agreed what the definition of love is, but you are saying the scientific community has come together?

Oh no, science would not. For years, science did not even touch the whole topic of love. I can remember, that even when I started in graduate school and said, that what I was interested in, it was explained to me very clearly, that if I wanted to be any kind of scientist - I mean I am a therapist, who gets couples into my lab and watches while they repair their relationship and helps them repair their relationship. But also I am a scientist - and I was told very clearly, that if you were scientist, you would not talk about love. That was just weird stuff for poets, and philosophers, and sex-manuals. So really, until about 15 years ago, it was a 'no no' for anyone, who wanted to be taken seriously, to stand up on an academic conference and talk about adult romantic love. People would sort of start to curl their lip. Sort of like, oh sit down right. And even

couples therapist at conferences would say: "Excuse me, what we do is, is we help couples not fight. We help couples to be a bit nicer to each other. Or cooperate. What are you talking about? You can not get people to feel more deeply loved and create compassion and empathy and caring and trust and closeness. No, no, we can not do that". So, it was really interesting because, over the last 25 years my couples - from working with thousands of couples and teaching thousands of therapists - my couples really taught me to understand love, to take it incredibly seriously, to honour it, to see how powerful it is. And it has taught me, that we can make sense of it and we can even shape it. And I think, that is revolutionary.

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I wanna ask you about that, because of your book, and I don't mean this in any pejorative way but it's sort of clinical; I mean it's not mooshy gooshy. It is not hug your partner more and you will be more in love. And go for this long romantic walks, that we see portrayed in movies ... But doesn't unpack the nature of love, a sort of steal away some of the romanticism or the mystery?

Are you kidding me? No, I don't think so! After studying it for 25 years, I have more respect for the magic of love. When I watch a distressed couple, who have been fighting for 20 years and the megawatt emotions and the pain and the longing. And I watch them in 20 sessions change their dance. Change it from a sort of recurring criticism and distancing into being able to reach for each other, and have what we call a 'hold me tight'-conversation. When I watch them do that, and I figure out how to help them do that: it is still magic, it is still magic. And it is more powerful then, well if you would ask me, it is more powerful then any romantic novel, because when we are loved we grow and bloom. I watch couples help each other change and grow in my office. I watch them make their families more solid and secure. I watch them help each other with difficult emotions, and things like PTST [Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome] and depression. There is nothing ... If you can help people heal their relationships and understand them, you can create relationships that heal. So it is still magic, it is still magic. But that does not mean, that it is just some sort of something, that we can never predict. You can create magic, we have just become magicians.

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You know, we live in a society, where we have phrases like friends with benefits and things like that. So I want to take the other side of it, which is monogamy, which quite sounds boring, in a sense. Because friends with benefits is sort of 'sexy' and 'isn't that interesting'. We sort of place monogamy in a sort of conventional, traditional thing. How natural, Sue Johnson, is monogamy?

From my point of view, it's obvious. You know, if we need these profound bonds, these attachment bonds, that really ... if you look around you in society it is obvious that we are animals with an incredible preference for investing in mating with one person and developing a relationship with this one person, who we can trust. And that we want that to last. The longing is obvious, if you talk to young people. They did a survey of young adolescents - even in this society, where people talk about monogamy is not possible and there is sex on every screen and everywhere - you talk to young

adolescents, they say their main aim in life is to find someone to love and have that love last. And it is very clear, when you look at other animals. Mammals who invest time to rear very vulnerable young. And have to really collaborate to rear very vulnerable young. Mammals, they prefer a mate, and they got that mate, they groom that mate, they feed that mate. They prefer to mate just with that mate. That does not mean, ... There is no human behaviour, that is constant all of the time. So, of course sex is just like anything else, some people will go and have a one night stand or mate with someone else. But it seems to me, when you look around you in society, that the longing and the preference for long term love with some deep connection in it, that answers our need for connection, is obvious and real.

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And yet we have some cultures in the world, not western cultures obviously, but some cultures in the world that embrace polygamy.

Well if you really look at those cultures most of the people in polygamous cultures only have one spouse, unless you have to be the king, or the richest man in the country. So, it is very interesting. I think the issue is we want it all. We want to be able to think that we can have thousands of sexual partners and we also want to have a deep emotional bond. I think, you can have it all. I just don't think, you can not have it all at the same time maybe. And I also want to say, that - you are hitting the nail on the head - the issue with monogamy is, that we have somehow associated it with sexual boredom. The evidence is very clear, in good survey research, that people that have the best sex, the most thrilling sex, find sex thrilling and have more sex, are the people in long term loving relationships. All this stuff about how being with the same person means you going to be bored out of your mind in bed is hooey, it is just hooey. If you really think about it: making love with somebody is an incredible act of communication and coordination. It actually takes some practice. We really know that the people, who don't want to be close, and they say they want lots of one night stands - actually we know from research - that they enjoy sex less, they have fewer orgasms, and they have less sex. So this is a huge myth, that monogamy is a delusion. I say: "No monogamy is not a delusion, if you know how to do it, it is delightful". This is all just some sort of big conundrum on how we have to bored, if we are with the same person. Not, if you are paying attention, and you have a deep emotional bond, and you know how to tune into each other.

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Alright, lets get into the science of it. Because love has its physiological reactions. What is going on in our brains, when we fall in love?

Well, we have known for years, that there are certain things that goes on in our brain, when we actually get attracted and effectuated with somebody. We get reward hormones like dopamine. We get flooded with oxytocin, which is a bonding hormone, that naturally occurs during sex. But we get flooded with that. But I think what is more interesting is the more recent research, that talks about how you only actually ... you do not have to make love to your partner to be flooded with this oxytocin, bonding hormone. You just have to think of your partner, and your brain gives you a little hit of

bonding hormone, that turns of fear and gives you this feeling of calmness and contentment. Nature is amazing. But we also know things like ... we understand the pain that is involved in love more. We understand that rejection and abandonment is processed in the same place in the brain and in the same way as physical pain. So when people in my office say, "Do not say that to me, it hurts!", I understand they are not talking in a metaphor. Closeness is a safety cue for your mammalian brain and rejection and abandonment are danger cues. And we are understanding the power of this, like ... we just did a study were we took women, who were repairing their relationship with their partner and we put them in the brain scan machine. And we found that, before they had this bonding conversations that we help them to have, they could lie in the machine and we tell them you see this X you going to be shocked on your feet, and whether they were alone in the machine, or holding a strangers hand, or holding their husbands hand, when they saw the X their brain went straight into alarm and they said the shock really hurt. After this bonding conversations, you put the women in the machine, their brain still freaks out, when they are alone or when a stranger is holding their hand. But when their husband holds their hand, and they feel securely bonded, their brain sees that big X and none of their alarm centres light up. Their husbands hand is an amazing safety cue, and they say the shock was just uncomfortable. This is the power of love, that can turn of fear and pain. This is why the research says, we are stronger, and more resilient, and healthier when we are connected with somebody who we love.

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Sometimes people say, as an adult said: "You know, I can not feel save in a relationship because I was ... something during childhood". So why ain't you make the connection for us? What happens to us as children, that makes us susceptible to love?

Oh I, think we all have certain sensitivities that we bring into our relationships. But some people have been deeply wounded and terrified, by the people they depend on the most. And of course, that leaves them amazingly weary. But the thing about this new science of love, it is incredibly hopeful, because what we have learned is that if you can help those people to accept their fear, understand their fears, understand their fears make sense. And talk to their partner about it, in a way that their partner understands. You get this incredible thing that happens, when the partner can come and comfort them, and support them, and help them deal with that fear. And those people can learn to trust. We know how to help people forgive injuries. We get great results, we get the best results in the world. 70 to 73 % of the couples, that we help in our labs and all around the world move their distressed relationship out of distress, they repair it and a much larger number improve their relationship. We know how to help people move into forgiveness and we know - what you understand, you can shape - so we know how to help people talk about painful pasts, and painful wounds. And that they are able to say to their partner: "I do not know how to trust you. I do not know how to let you in. This is to scary for me." And the partner, we help the partner respond to that and the partner comforts them and holds them. And they learn that, what we all need to know, which is that there is somebody who gives us a safe haven, who can hold us, make us feel safe. And they learn that.

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I want us to stay sort of with that how your childhood forms. The science what you look into, which is adulthood. We are into attachment, parenting, children told that: "There is your mum and your dad, or your two moms and your two dads. But those are the people you can trust most in the world and they form an attachment." How does that play into our adult lives and looking at love?

It is really interesting how it plays in. I mean, I think we have known for years that we are social animals and that we need social contact. But I think what this new science is saying is: we do not just need social contact, we do not just need a tribe or village. We need to know, we really matter, to a few people in that tribe and village, who will come, when we call, who we can really depend on, and who will literally hold us and protect us from the uncertainties of life. But what is interesting now, I think is, is that all the evidence is that society is getting lonelier and lonelier. We are spending more and more time on our computers, at tasks, travelling, working. And people ... when they do surveys, more and more people say that they have nobody to confide in. We turn to our romantic relationships for our emotional support in a way that we have never done before in human history. People get married, not to have kids so much and not to survive economically. They get married for emotional security. I think that, we really need that from our marriages now. So society is changing, marriage is changing, and it is more important than ever, for us, not to think of love as a mystery, to think of it that we can understand, scientifically study and shape. I think we can do that. But the need for that is huge.

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You talked about oxytocin, which is this chemical, bonding hormone, that our body produces. Which is now marketed and sold in a bottle. I do not want to get into that, but I want to ask you: does oxytocin, as a chemical that goes off in our body, does it promote monogamy?

Well it promotes monogamy, in that, it fills you with this calm contentment, when you think of this person, that you are bonded with. Yes. Saying that, I mean, it is useful to think about the fact that our need for connection, our vulnerability and our need for connection, the fact that our children take so long to grow up, for example. You have to create a family to have that child survive. Our need for that, has actually created our chemistry and our wiring in our brain. So yes, we are filled with bonding hormones and that does promote monogamy. But it is a bit tricky, because if you are into science there is no one thing, that is the sort of magic killer answer. The fact of the matter is, you can spray that stuff from the internet up into your nose until your purple, it only goes so far. You have a brain attached to your nose, and your brain says: I just sprayed oxytocin up my nose, but in fact I don't trust that guy over there, because I don't like his face and I do not know him. We like to take things, like that and make them into incredible magical cures, and they are not. Somebody asked me actually in Switzerland, if I wanted to do studies, getting my couples to spray oxytocin up their nose in therapy. And I said: "No", because we know how to help people to have intimate conversations in a way, that their brain naturally floods them with oxytocin. We do not need this spray. And also the spray is not going to work, because people are

going to say: "I love you, I love you" and their partner is going to say: "Is that you or the oxytocin talking? You had it just sprayed up your nose. I don't believe you." So, it is duh. But it is fascinating. It is a revolution. If you had told me all this years ago, when I decided that I wanted to help couples, and I was fascinated by the fighting in couples. I did not know how to help them. If you would have told me, that I would be doing brain scans studies and standing up on stage with the people, who found mirroring neurons in the brain, and help us understand how we feel empathy with people. I would have laughed at you and said: "Do not be silly. I'm just a therapist. I just want to understand how to help people come together and not fight and destroy each other." It is grown amazingly. It is a real revolution.

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So, I am going to get a little personal here. I am in the time of my life, I have three young children. Friends and I spend a lot of time talking about our relationships changing, morphing, not being what they once were as we raise and grow human beings. What effect do children have on a couples relationship?

There is some debate about that, but if you look at the general research: having children is a huge transition, to become three, or four, or five. It is a huge transition and often it is a real pivotal moment for couples. It is a kind of make or break moment, and people have to adapt. And for example, if one of the ways your bonded and stayed close with was, that you had great sex. Well, fatigue, sleep deprivation, interferes with sexual arousal and that is the truth. So, that is just there. So, couples struggle with it. But the evidence is, that almost with any crisis or transition, it is the same story. If you understand a bit about love and you know how to have what we call these 'hold me tight'-conversations, you can deal with almost any stressor or transition, because you deal with it together. And you can support each other, and you can communicate. You can talk about the fact "Hé, I am really disappointed, because Saturday was the night we always had hot sex and you were asleep". But you can talk about that, and deal with it and decide to make love on Sunday morning. But if you can not talk, if you do not know how to bond and have this trusting conversations, it magnifies any problem you are having, and then people get caught in this dreadful patterns of blaming and distancing. And then they split up. It is a crisis point for marriages.

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It seems to me Sue, that a lot of this 'hold me tight'-conversations, a lot about what you are saying is just making the time and space and the openness to have an honest conversation with your partner to keep everything from the emotional, the physical, the physiological parts of love going well. It seems very simple.

Yes. Well, you just said something very profound, because you can go and look in magazines for all kind of tips, for having dates, to improve your marriage. But the bottom line is, you are absolutely right, and that is one of the reasons I wrote love sense, because if we honour our need for connection, we know how powerful it is, we know how much we need it, then yes, we start to make it a priority, we give it time. How many people just go through their week without even turning and looking into their partners eyes and saying: "How are you doing? Who are you? How do you feel

about me? How do you feel about you? What is happening with you?". If that gets lost in the rush of modern life, and then one day we wake-up and we look at the person in bed with us and we say "This person is a stranger, who are they anyway?". So you are right, what you honour, and give time to, and give priority to grows. And love is no different. We know now how to give attention to our children in a way, that we did not 50 years ago. I think, now is the time for us to learn how to give that time and attention to our partner. If you create that save bond, you are better at everything you do in life. You are stronger. You are more confident. You are more resilient. You are happier. You are healthier. And it goes on-and-on. The research on love, it is just associated with every good thing in life. But somehow we push it to the side, for our careers, and our internet, and our hobbies, and our gym and our ... well almost everything comes before turning to your partner and saying "Hi!". I have been married 26 years, so I know how it goes.

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We are going to end our conversation shortly. But before we let you go, we make the broader connection, because we started our conversation by you saying there has been so much advancement scientifically, about the nature of love, and how we can groom it and all those things. Make the connection between happy couples and a happier society.

Oh, that is easy. All the evidence is very clear, when you have this real strong connection, you are better in everything you do. You deal with parenting better. You are a better care keeper for your kids. You are a better lover with your partner. You have a better sex life, which helps you bond and stay together. You are more resilient to stress. You are healthier. You are less likely to get depressed. You are less likely to get PTST [Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome], if you are in a crisis. You are better at learning. You are better in going out into the world and exploring. If you are a young career woman, you are more confident and you reach your career goals faster. You are more open to other people. You are a better citizen. You collaborate with other people better. I can give you a list as long as your arm for the effect that this secure bonding has on people. In the end it all boils down to, they feel safer, they feel more connected with other people, they are better at collaborating with other people. If we want to create a really civilized, a really human, society, that develops the best of who we can be, we must understand the power of the human family and the power, of what we call, romantic love to create this safety and to grow people. So I do not know if I did it, I could talk about that for a long time.

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You have given me a good list here, it sounds pretty convincing. I appreciate your time. Thank you. It was lovely to talk to you.

It was lovely to talk to you too.

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