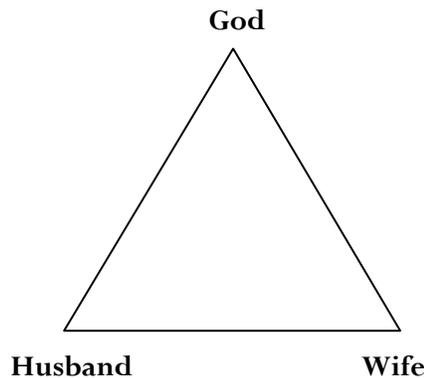




A TRIANGULAR MODEL OF LOVE

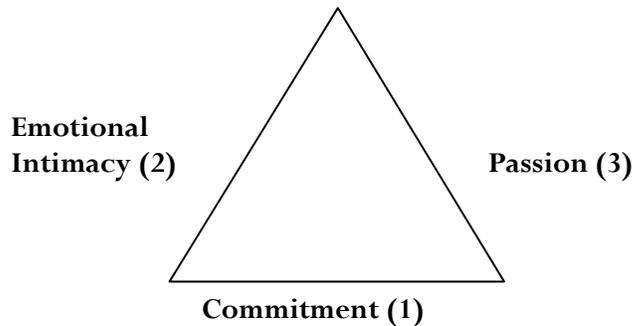
How do you define love? Is it a feeling or a choice? Both? Love can be hard to describe and define because it has multiple facets and meanings. This article shows how several aspects of love interact for the purpose of helping you better understand love in marital relationships. *And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16)*

TRIANGLE 1: GOD – HUSBAND – WIFE



This commonly known diagram shows the relationships between a husband, wife, and God. Each line represents a relationship: God – Husband; God – Wife; and Husband – Wife. As the spouses grow closer to God in their personal relationship with Christ, they also grow closer to each other. This shows the importance of spiritual growth over time. When each spouse has a healthy and growing relationship with God, their love for Christ is reflected and lived out in the marriage. Spiritual stagnation and/or backsliding in one spouse’s individual relationship with God gradually leads to deterioration of marital and family relationships as well. Marriages in which one spouse is a believer and the other is not (“unequally yoked”) and marriages of two unbelievers lead to unbalanced and misshapen triangles. The spiritual dimension of marriage is the most intimate and core component of marriage because all other aspects of the relationship are developed out of it.

TRIANGLE 2: COMMITMENT → EMOTIONAL INTIMACY → PASSION



Marriages that are healthy and growing will display the following three major aspects of love: Commitment, Emotional Intimacy, and Passion. Each aspect of love interacts with the others; they are interrelated. If you want your marital love to deepen over time, you can’t simply be strong in one area and ignore the others.

COMMITMENT = CHRIST-LIKE, SELF-SACRIFICIAL LOVE (Agape)

The Commitment side of love is a decision/choice that one person makes to sacrificially love another. The Greek word “Agape” best describes this Christ-like, self-sacrificial love. Agape love is repeatedly used in the New Testament to describe Christ’s love toward us and what our love should be toward others. Agape love is unique in that it focuses on the well-being and good fortune of the other person without requiring or demanding that the other person responds in kind. Christ is our example: “*But God commendeth his love [agape] toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” Rom. 5:8. The Commitment side of love is evident when couples decide to marry and stay together for richer, for poorer, for better, or for worse. It is not based on feelings that go up and down due to situational factors or how much love the other person “deserves” at any given time. Commitment is the foundation of trust in a marriage. With the Commitment side of love solidly in place, couples can freely build the second aspect of love in this model: Emotional Intimacy.

EMOTIONAL INTIMACY = AFFECTION (Storge) + FRIENDSHIP (Phileo)

Use of the word intimacy in this model refers to Emotional Intimacy, not sexual intimacy. The Emotional Intimacy side of love is the result of blending two important aspects of love. This allows couples to share their hearts and feel they are “best friends.”

Affection (Greek = Storge). This aspect refers to familial affection and care. In a marital relationship, this is lived out when one spouse intentionally focuses on expressions of love that are helpful and meaningful to the other spouse. It is essential to remember that we each tend to *express* love the way that we like to *receive* love, rather than focusing on what makes our spouse feel loved. Affection, as a part of Emotional Intimacy, is not about physical intimacy. We are truly affectionate when we purposefully and regularly apply the combination of quality time, words of affirmation, gifts, acts of service and physical touch that is meaningful to our spouse.

Friendship (Greek = Phileo). This aspect refers to the regular communication of thoughts, feelings, hopes and disappointments, etc. between spouses. Friendship grows as they spend time together and develop a collection of memories and experiences unique or special to them as a couple. In the emotional/relational sense it is the experience of “knowing and being known.”

Due to the safety and trust of Commitment and the emotional connection and expression of Emotional Intimacy, couples have the opportunity to experience Passion.

PASSION = ROMANTIC & SEXUAL LOVE THAT ENCOMPASSES HEART, SOUL, MIND, AND BODY (Eros)

The Passionate side of love is the exciting and exhilarating part of love that creates the feeling of “being in love.” Romance often occurs as an expression of focused Emotional Intimacy. It is the bridge between Emotional Intimacy and Passion. True Passion connects deeply with the heart, mind, body, and soul of your spouse. Romance allows couples to experience times of being very close, emotionally and relationally, in a way that rekindles their Passionate love. The foundation of Commitment and Emotional Intimacy allows a couple’s Passionate feelings and sexual relationship the opportunity to draw them closer together. It is important to remember that while Passion is an intense and exciting expression of love, it is only experienced periodically (versus continuously) and is heavily dependent upon the health of Commitment and Emotional Intimacy.

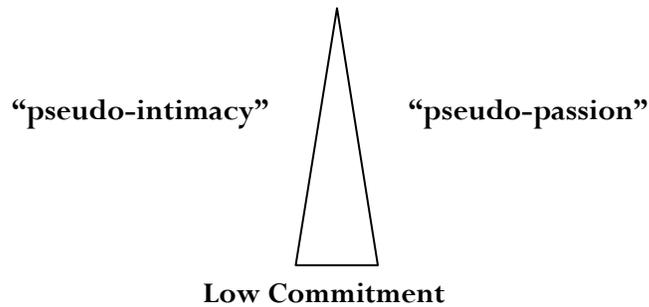
HOW THE TYPES OF LOVE WORK TOGETHER

Commitment (1) = Self-Sacrifice **Emotional Intimacy (2)** = Friendship **Passion (3)** = Excitement

While certainly an oversimplification, consider each of the sides of love as listed above. Keep in mind that every couple's triangle is constantly changing shape and size. While, theoretically, having all sides of the triangle balanced is the goal, life simply does not allow it to stay that way for very long. Conflict, hurt, and/or damage to any side of the triangle will affect the other sides.

Example One: During a time when a spouse is sick with the stomach flu, the Commitment side of love must be the strongest. During times like these the Emotional Intimacy side of love may be gently nurtured while the Passionate side is put "on hold." Under the circumstances, this "imbalance" is necessary and will hopefully change as soon as the spouse's health returns. It is important to note that when the Passionate side is waning during the illness, the Commitment and Emotional Intimacy sides must make up the balance.

Example Two: Danger Ahead! – Low commitment with high "pseudo-intimacy" and high "pseudo-passion." When the Commitment side of love is weak, a couple may be in a serious crisis because the foundation of the marriage is threatened. If a spouse tries to get his/her needs met in unhealthy and unbiblical ways, he/she may seek fulfillment elsewhere through fantasy or extramarital affairs. The triangle below shows the unbalanced shape of "counterfeit love" that occurs in an affair, displaying high "pseudo-intimacy" and "pseudo-passion" countered with very little commitment.

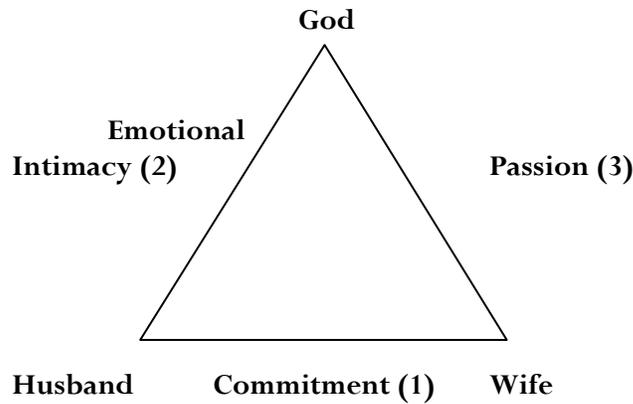


Example Three: If the Commitment and trust between husband and wife has been damaged by hurtful choices and actions, both Emotional Intimacy and Passion will suffer greatly. Likewise, it is very important for trust, safety, affection, and friendship to be built first before the openness of the Passionate side of the relationship can be experienced as God designed it.

Example Four: Dry Marriages – Low Intimacy and Low Passion with High Commitment. An unfortunately common triangle arrangement is one in which Commitment is high but Emotional Intimacy and Passion are low. These couples may have been together for years, but may barely know how to have a conversation together about their relationship. They are married out of "duty" and they stay married because of Commitment. Even though they are committed to staying married, they are missing much of what God designed their marriage to be.



TRIANGLE 3: AN INTEGRATED CHRISTIAN MODEL OF LOVE



Triangle three is a composite showing Triangles 1 and 2 superimposed onto each other. This model shows that a husband and wife who share Commitment for each other (and who are growing together towards God) will be able to experience Emotional Intimacy and Passion for each other (and for God). In a relational sense, they have deepening commitment and trust with each other, a growing friendship and show affection to each other, and they experience excitement and desire for each other. In a spiritual sense, they have deepening commitment and maturity of their faith, a growing relationship with Christ, and a feeling of excitement about what God has done for them and what He can do for others.

CONCLUSION

While Commitment is something that one spouse can do alone, both spouses must work together to deepen Emotional Intimacy and Passion. Emotional Intimacy is one of the easiest parts of a marriage to neglect. Couples must protect and take time to nurture their Emotional Intimacy side if they want to have a healthy Passion side. It is important for couples to monitor and be aware of the shape of their triangles at any given time. Remember that perfectly balanced triangles are the *theoretical* goal in this model. Individual circumstances and life transitions in each couple's relationship will cause unique variations in the shape of their triangle over time. Couples who notice that a side of their triangle needs attention can seek to bolster it by building that side (and the other sides) of their marriage. Maintaining your individual relationship with Christ is the best way to make sure love in your marriage stays strong.

To read the full article, "A Triangular Model of Love," please visit our website: www.accounseling.org

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ACCFS has numerous resources which have been developed to assist couples in their marital relationship. From our premarital program, *Preparing for a Great Marriage*, to our *Foundations for a Loving Marriage* seminar to our *Nurturing a Great Marriage* enrichment program, these resources are geared for every stage and level of need within a marriage. Please visit our website at www.accounseling.org or contact our office at 309-263-5536 for more information.