



Characteristics of True Love

Joy Carroll, Ed.D., Psychologist, LifeLine Counseling Center

A loving, intimate relationship is one in which both partners can be vulnerable and feel safe.

Each can be themselves without fear. This safety requires equal power in the relationship. Therefore, it's impossible to have intimacy in a relationship dominated by control or abuse.

Love is a function of time.

Sufficient time must pass for partners to learn about each other and develop the trust necessary for intimacy. One cannot fall in love "at first sight" because it's impossible to have a trusting relationship after only a few contacts. Healthy love grows as trust grows.

Unmet needs arising from childhood family and other significant relationships affect relationship choices.

The relating styles of our childhood family are often repeated in adult relationships. We tend to operate in relationships the way our family did, especially during stressful times. If you grew up in a hurting family where which poor relationship skills were modeled, unhealthy behavior may look normal because it's familiar to you. This makes choosing a good partner a tough assignment. You may be attracted to partners who are similar to persons in your childhood family because their relating styles are familiar.

If you're unable to recognize healthy love, it's tough to make good relationship choices.

Knowing how to recognize a loving, trustworthy person is sometimes difficult and confusing, especially if you've been in toxic relationships. Being educated about the traits of a healthy relationship lays the foundation for better choices.

If you haven't been exposed to many healthy relationships, you may feel uncomfortable with a partner who is caring, respectful and sensitive to your needs.

You may even find yourself testing and sabotaging the relationship. If this happens, communicate your fears and concerns honestly to your partner so he or she will understand what's happening. Practice is the key to improving your relationship skills and becoming comfortable with healthiness. Don't give up!

Take a look at the list below. These are the specific characteristics of intimate relationships that allow unconditional acceptance and personal growth.

In A Healthy Relationship . . .

- both parties are sensitive to the others' needs without neglecting his or her own needs.
- both parties can be themselves without fear.
- conflict occurs often enough to deal with problems while they're still small. Conflict is dealt with in a respectful and non-abusive manner.
- neither person gets caught up in a power struggle. Both parties understand they can love each other and have different points of view.

Joy Carroll, Ed.D., Psychologist **LifeLine Counseling Center**
986.981.7400 www.lifeline-counseling.org

- feelings are valued and not discounted.
- each person listens carefully and tries to understand the other's point of view even if he or she doesn't agree.
- neither person is afraid to share and be shared with, even when it involves unpleasant things.
- neither person expects the other to meet all of his or her needs.
- each person feels good about himself or herself separate from the relationship.
- honesty is maintained. There's no game playing.
- partners have both separate and common interests.
- there is a sharing relationship where neither partner is giving or taking all the time.
- each partner can be angry, sad, overwhelmed and vulnerable and still feel safe.
- each person can say "no" without the other taking it personally.

A Look at Your Relationship History

Exercise A: Childhood Family Comparisons

Step 1: Put a "C" beside the characteristics on pages 6 and 7 that are descriptive of the family you grew up in. Put an "R" beside the items describing your past or current adult relationships.

Step 2: How many traits are common to both your childhood family and adult relationships? Note the healthy traits that aren't marked with a "C". These traits may be absent in adult relationships because they weren't modeled for you as a child.

Step 3: Now look at the items that aren't marked with an "R". Were these healthy traits absent due to your behavior or that of your partner or both? Do you need to work on changing your relating style, your relationship choices or do both need to be addressed?

Exercise B: Trends in Adult Relationships

Step 1: On a piece of paper, write the names of your previous and current partners.

Step 2: Under each name, make two columns. Label them Healthy and Unhealthy.

Step 3: In the Healthy column, list healthy traits describing the relationship between you and each partner.

Step 4: In the Unhealthy column, list unhealthy traits describing the relationship between you and each partner.

Step 5: Note any similarities or trends in healthy or unhealthy characteristics. Are you choosing partners who tend to have the same unhealthy traits? If you are, examine why you are making these choices.