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The Many Faces of Love

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Affective relationships give us a sense of purpose and provide added meanings to our lives, actions, and choices, as they create powerful motivations to set and pursue goals which aim is that of maintaining them. They affect us deeply, offering us opportunities to feel and express emotions that come from our universal need to be in intimate relationships where we love and are loved.

Sharing our experiences and emotions enriches us and helps us manage our uncomfortable emotions, better adapting to life's challenges and partaking of the joys of life in deeper and fuller ways.

But what is this feeling we call love? Love is not a single feeling, but a complex of many emotions – tenderness, attraction, resentment, frustration, longing, respect, anger, admiration, disappointment, and so on – that are felt at different times with different intensity.

When we are in a good place with our partner, we mostly feel the wish to be together, as the sexual attraction and the feelings of comfort and security are the ones we are most aware of. After we had an argument, on the other hand, we may be hurt and frustrated, upset and disappointed and may fear things will never again be the same as before. We may be angry and focus on our partner's negative traits. This anger, in turn, keeps us apart. When we feel emotionally distant from one another, we may feel numb and out of touch with our emotions. We may not be interested in exploring what is going on, as some of our feelings are turned off. Or, we may experience deep longing and sadness. When we feel rejected, as when our love is unrequited, we panic and feel deeply hurt. We are in agony, and cannot soothe ourselves or see anything positive in any other area of our lives.

As we go through different life experiences, we are affected and changed by them, each generating different feelings and reactions in us. To go through these changes is part and parcel of being alive, as every experience brings with it different feelings and throws a different light on how we experience life and who we are. So, no wonder why people in intimate love relationships are at times confused and dismayed by the many emotional changes they and their partners undergo during the course of their relationship, and afraid for their future together!

Maintaining a loved relationship is a balancing act, at times challenging, at times frustrating, but always worthwhile. At times, to stay connected with a loved one seems like an impossible task, particularly when we are struggling with some personal emotional issues that reduce our abilities to stay connected and increase our anxieties and fears.

When we are in some kind of emotional pain – we feel depressed, anxious, confused – we become ungrounded and our abilities to tolerate emotional closeness and reap the benefits of it are often compromised. At those times we may tend to isolate, withdraw and avoid close contact, because we feel too vulnerable and are afraid we may get hurt or hurt ourselves or our partner, if we seek closeness. We feel we are in so much pain that we cannot take any more than what we are already experiencing. Yet reaching out to our loved ones, or to a professional, is what can bring about healing.

Remember: intimate relationships are often the reasons for our most devastating emotional pains, yet they also are the means that guide us toward healing them. When we are in deep pain, we cannot, alone, make ourselves feel better, as the pain gets magnified and feels insurmountable. We ruminate on the same issues, over and over, wasting energy without getting ahead. So, we lose our ability to assess and to reflect, as we cannot see the forest because of the trees, too wrapped up in our emotions to be able to put things in perspective. For this we need another person – someone we feel safe with – to provide feedback, offer support, soothing and reassurance, and help us become more comfortable with our emotions and make sense of what is happening to us. Together with this person, the ability to process our emotions and understand what is happening can be regained.

It is the emotional connection created by the relationship itself, not so much what is discussed and how, that is healing. It is the feeling of emotional safety that this connection provides that facilitates opening up, reaching out for support and help, taking in what the other person has to offer and which allays our painful emotions.

And, as these become more manageable, we take a step back and reflect of what is going on and how we are affected by them. This reflective ability, in turn, opens up options for us, as we now can think and feel about how to address issues that are at the root of our emotional discomfort. As we said earlier, this process requires the presence of a safe person, be it a loved one or a professional.

Psychotherapy is like a microcosm reflecting what is going on in our life in general. Because of it, we express emotions via a process called transference about people in our lives and about ourselves. And, because we don't have to worry about being judged, rejected, abused or abandoned, the therapeutic

setting can provide an opportunity to safely explore what is happening to us emotionally and process, together, emotions that would have been too uncomfortable and scary to explore and feel when alone.