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What Happens to Love in a Military Marriage?

I first met Chuck in Germany. He had a successful military career—twenty-three years under his belt. However, all was not well. In his own words: “My marriage is in shambles. I don’t understand love and I’m not sure you can keep love alive in a military marriage. I was madly in love with my first wife. We were high school sweethearts. We got married right after graduation, and a month later I joined the military. The first couple of years were exciting, but eventually our love grew cold. We seemed like roommates living in the same house. On the day after our tenth anniversary, she went home to visit her mother and never returned. I didn’t feel all that bad about it because by this time neither one of us loved each other.”

“What about your second marriage?” I inquired.

“It was about a year after our divorce that I met Cathy. At the time, she was also in the military. It was one of those ‘love at first sight deals,’” he said. “It was great. We had an awesome marriage until we

got assigned to different bases. That was tough. So a year later, she left the military so we could be together. Then, the baby came along and things changed. We never rediscovered the connection we had in the first year of our marriage. It was like our love evaporated. She and our son left last Tuesday to go back to the States, and I know it's just a matter of time until she files for divorce."

"When things were going well, how did you express your love to Cathy?" I asked.

"I told her how beautiful she was. I told her I loved her. I told her how proud I was to be her husband. But after three or four years, she started complaining about petty things at first—like my not taking the garbage out, or my not hanging up my clothes. Later she went to attacking my character, telling me she didn't feel she could trust me, accusing me of being unfaithful to her. She became a totally negative person. When I met her she was one of the most positive people I had ever known. That's one of the things that attracted me to her; she never complained about anything. Everything I did was wonderful, but after a few years, I could do nothing right. I really think I tried. I honestly don't know what happened."

I could tell Chuck was experiencing internal struggle over what was going on in his marriage, so I said, "You still love Cathy, don't you?"

"I think I do," he said. "I don't have the kind of love I had when we first got married, but I certainly don't want a divorce. I think we could have made it, but I don't think Cathy wants to work on the marriage." I could tell this strong warrior had a wounded heart.

"Did things go downhill after the baby was born?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I felt like she gave all of her attention to the baby, and I no longer mattered. It was as if her goal in life was to have a baby, and after the baby she no longer needed me."

“Did you tell her that?” I asked.

“Yes, I told her. She said I was crazy. She said I did not understand the stress of being a twenty-four-hour nurse, and I should be more understanding and help her more. I really tried, but it didn’t seem to make any difference. After that we just grew apart. After a while there was no love left, just deadness.”

Chuck continued the conversation and I listened. “What happened to love after the first year of marriage?” he asked. “Is my experience common? Is that why we have so many divorces in the military? I can’t believe this has happened to me twice. And those who don’t divorce, do they learn to live with the emptiness, or does love really stay alive in some marriages?”

The questions Chuck asked are the questions thousands of military couples are asking. Sometimes the answers are couched in psychological research jargon that is almost incomprehensible. Sometimes they are couched in humor and folklore. Most of the jokes and pithy sayings contain some truth, but they are often like offering an aspirin to a person with cancer.

The desire for romantic love in marriage is deeply rooted in our psychological makeup. Books abound on the subject. TV, radio, podcasts, social media all deal with it. The Internet is full of advice. So are our parents and friends. Keeping love alive in our marriages is serious business.

With all the help available from media experts, why is it so few couples seem to have found the secret to keeping love alive after the wedding?

THE TRUTH WE’RE MISSING

The answer to those questions is the purpose of this book. It’s not that the books and articles already published are not helpful. The

problem is we have overlooked one fundamental truth: People speak different love languages.

My academic training is in the area of anthropology. Therefore, I have studied in the area of linguistics, which identifies a number of major language groups: Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, English, Portuguese, Greek, German, French, and so on. Most of us grow up learning the language of our parents and siblings, which becomes our *primary* or native tongue. Later, we may learn additional languages—but usually with much more effort. These become our *secondary* languages. We speak and understand best our native language. We feel most comfortable speaking that language. The more we use a secondary language, the more comfortable we become conversing in it. If we speak only our primary language and encounter someone else who speaks only his or her primary language, which is different from ours, our communication will be limited. We must rely on pointing, grunting, drawing pictures, or acting out our ideas. We can communicate, but it's awkward. Language differences are part and parcel of human culture. If we are to communicate effectively across cultural lines, we must learn the language of those with whom we wish to communicate.

In the area of love, it is similar. Your emotional love language and the language of your spouse may be as different as Chinese from English. No matter how hard you try to express love in English, if your spouse understands only Chinese, you will never understand how to love each other. Chuck was speaking the language of Words of Affirmation to Cathy when he told her she was beautiful, he loved her, and he was proud to be her husband. He was speaking love, and he was sincere, but she did not understand his language. Perhaps she was looking for love in his behavior and didn't see it. Being sincere is

not enough. We must be willing to learn our spouse's primary love language if we are to effectively communicate love.

My conclusion after many years of marriage counseling is that there are five emotional love languages—five ways that people speak and understand emotional love. In the field of linguistics a language may have numerous dialects or variations. Similarly, within the five basic emotional love languages, there are many dialects. The number of ways to express love within a love language is limited only by one's imagination. The important thing is to speak the love language of your spouse.

Seldom do a husband and wife have the same primary emotional love language. We tend to speak our primary love language, and we become confused when our spouse does not understand what we are communicating. We are expressing our love, but the message does not come through because we are speaking what, to them, is a foreign language. Therein lies the fundamental problem, and it is the purpose of this book to offer a solution. That's why I dare to write another book on love. Once we discover the five basic love languages and understand our own primary love language, as well as the primary love language of our spouse, we will then have the needed information to apply the ideas in the books and articles.

Once you identify and learn to speak your spouse's primary love language, I believe you will have discovered the key to a long-lasting, loving marriage. These languages can be spoken even when you are separated by deployment. Love need not evaporate after the wedding, but in order to keep it alive, most of us will have to put forth the effort to learn a secondary love language. We cannot rely on our native tongue if our spouse does not understand it. If we want them to feel the love we are trying to communicate, we must express it in his or her primary love language.

YOUR TURN

Are you willing to put in the work to learn your spouse's love language?

Keeping the Love Tank Full

Love is the most important word in the English language—and the most confusing. Both secular and religious thinkers agree that love plays a central role in life. Psychologists have concluded that the need to feel loved is a primary human emotional need. For love, we will climb mountains, cross seas, traverse desert sands, and endure untold hardships. Without love, mountains become unclimbable, seas uncrossable, deserts unbearable, and hardships our lot in life.

If we can agree that the word *love* permeates human society, we must also agree it's a most confusing word. We use it in a thousand ways. We say, "I love pizza," and in the next breath, "I love my mother." We speak of loving activities: swimming, reading, running. We love objects: food, cars, houses. We love animals: dogs, cats, even pet snails. We love nature: trees, grass, flowers, and weather. We love people: mother, father, son, daughter, wives, husbands, friends. We even fall in love with love.

If all that is not confusing enough, we also use the word *love* to explain behavior. “I did it because I love her.” That explanation is given for all kinds of actions. A politician is involved in an adulterous relationship, and he calls it love. However, most of his constituents call it stupidity. The preacher, on the other hand, calls it sin. The wife of an alcoholic picks up the pieces after her husband’s latest episode. She calls it love, but the psychologist calls it codependency. The parent indulges all the child’s wishes, calling it love. The family therapist would call it irresponsible parenting. What is “loving behavior”?

The purpose of this book is not to eliminate all confusion surrounding the word *love*, but to focus on that kind of love that is essential to our emotional health. Child psychologists affirm that every child has certain basic emotional needs that must be met if he is to be emotionally stable. Among those emotional needs, none is more basic than the need for love and affection, the need to sense that he or she belongs and is wanted. With an adequate supply of affection, the child will likely develop into a responsible adult. Without that love, he or she will be emotionally and socially challenged.

I liked the metaphor the first time I heard it: “Inside every child is an ‘emotional tank’ waiting to be filled with love. When a child really feels loved, he will develop normally but when the love tank is empty, the child will misbehave. Much of the misbehavior of children is motivated by the cravings of an empty ‘love tank.’” I was listening to Dr. Ross Campbell, a psychiatrist who specialized in the treatment of children and adolescents.

As I listened, I thought of the hundreds of parents who had sat in my office and shared the misdeeds of their children with me. I had never visualized an empty love tank inside those children, but I had certainly seen the results of it. Their misbehavior was a misguided

search for the love they did not feel. They were seeking love in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways.

I remember Ashley, who at thirteen years of age was being treated for a sexually transmitted disease. Her military parents were crushed. They were angry with Ashley. They were upset with the school, which they blamed for teaching her about sex. “Why would she do this?” they asked.

In my conversation with Ashley, she told me of her parents’ divorce when she was six years old. “I thought my father left because he didn’t love me,” she said. “When my mother remarried when I was ten, I felt she now had someone to love her, but I still had no one to love me. I wanted so much to be loved. I met this boy at school. He was older than me, but he liked me. I couldn’t believe it. He was kind to me, and in a while I really felt he loved me. I didn’t want to have sex, but I wanted to be loved.”

Ashley’s “love tank” had been empty for many years. Her mother and stepfather had provided for her physical needs but had not realized the deep emotional struggle raging inside her. They certainly loved Ashley, and they thought she felt their love. Not until it was almost too late did they discover they were not speaking Ashley’s primary love language.

The emotional need for love, however, is not simply a childhood phenomenon. That need follows us into adulthood and into marriage. The “in love” experience temporarily meets that need, but has a limited and predictable life-span. After we come down from the high of the “in love” obsession, the emotional need for love resurfaces because it is fundamental to our nature. It’s at the center of our emotional desires. We needed love before we “fell in love,” and we will need it as long as we live.

The need to feel loved by one’s spouse is at the heart of marital

desires. A man said to me recently, “What good is all the career success, all the honors, if your wife doesn’t love you?” Do you understand what he was really saying? “More than anything, I want to be loved by my wife.” Status and career accomplishments are no replacement for human, emotional love. A wife says, “He’s always too busy for me—until it’s nighttime and he wants to jump in bed with me. I hate it.” She is not a wife who hates sex; she is a wife desperately pleading for emotional love.

OUR CRY FOR LOVE

Something in our nature cries out to be loved by another. Isolation is devastating to the human psyche. That’s why solitary confinement is considered the cruelest of punishments. At the heart of humankind’s existence is the desire to be intimate and to be loved by another. Marriage is designed to meet that need for intimacy and love. If the need for love is not met, the intimacy we thought we had evaporates and the marriage seems empty. But if love is important, it’s also elusive. I have listened to many military couples share their secret pain. Some came to me because the inner ache had become unbearable. Others came because they realized their behavior patterns or the misbehavior of their spouse was destroying the marriage. Some came simply to inform me they no longer wanted to be married. Their dreams of “living happily ever after” had been dashed against the hard walls of reality. Again and again I have heard the words “Our love is gone; our relationship is dead. We used to feel close, but not now. We no longer enjoy being with each other. We don’t meet each other’s needs.” Their stories bear testimony that adults as well as children have “love tanks.”

Could it be that deep inside hurting couples exists an invisible “emotional love tank” with its gauge on empty? Could the

misbehavior, withdrawal, harsh words, and critical spirit occur because of that empty tank? If we could find a way to fill it, could the marriage be reborn? With a full tank would couples be able to create an emotional climate where it's possible to discuss differences and resolve conflicts? Could that tank be the key that makes marriage work?

I have listened to many military couples share their secret pain.

Those questions sent me on a long journey. Along the way, I discovered the simple yet powerful insights contained in this book. The journey has taken me not only through years of marriage counseling but into the hearts and minds of hundreds of military couples throughout America. From Seattle to Miami, couples have invited me into the inner chamber of their marriages, and we have talked openly. The illustrations included in this book are cut from the fabric of real life. Only names and places are changed to protect the privacy of the individuals who have spoken so freely.

Keeping the emotional love tank full is as important to a marriage as maintaining the proper oil level is to an automobile. Running your marriage on an empty “love tank” may cost you even more than trying to drive your car without oil. What you are about to read has the potential of saving thousands of marriages and can even enhance the emotional climate of a good marriage. Whatever the quality of your marriage now, it can always be better.

WARNING: Understanding the five love languages and learning to speak the primary love language of your spouse may radically affect his or her behavior. People behave differently when their emotional love tanks are full.

Before we examine the five love languages, however, we must address one other important but confusing phenomenon: the euphoric experience of “falling in love.”

YOUR TURN

On a scale of 0 to 10, how full is your love tank? What do you think your spouse would say about their love tank? If their answer is anything less than 10, you might say, “What could I do to help fill it?”