

## Chapter 14 | Only Sacrificial Love Can Save Your Marriage From The COVID-19 Lockdown



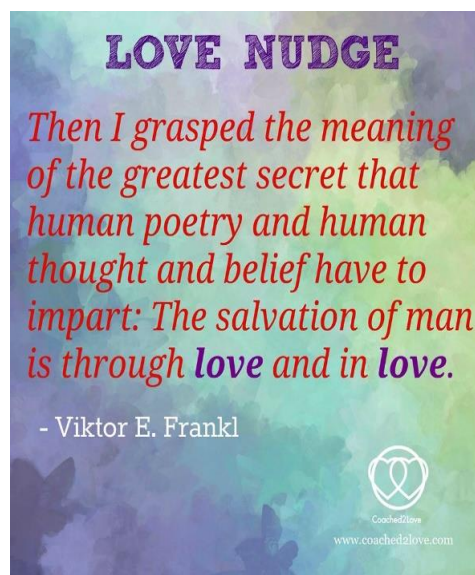
In a good marriage, your spouse is both your Heaven and hell, because you will find happiness and personal growth only through the gate of suffering.

### What's Love Got to do With Surviving COVID-19?

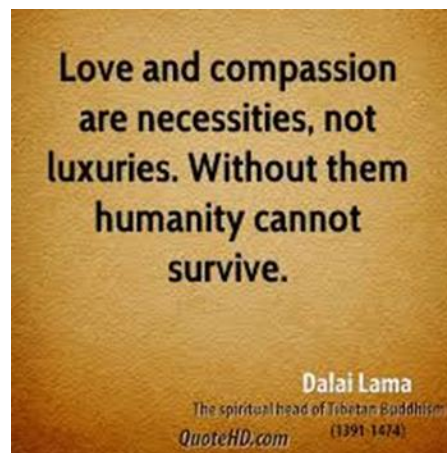
My answer might surprise you. Love can either be the most powerful motivation for surviving and personal growth, or the most destructive force in your life; it can either give you the reason for living in spite of suffering, or it can make you miserable and violent. It all depends on the kind of love you have embraced.

According to Lee (1973), there are six colours of love. Hendrick & Hendrick (1986) produced a *Love Attitude Scale* to measure these six types of love:

1. **Eros.** Lovers are attached to each other through sex appeal or physical chemistry; similar to passionate love.
2. **Pragma.** Potential love-objects are rationally selected for pragmatic reasons, such as career and family background.



3. **Mania.** It is characterized by cognitive obsession as well as emotional peaks and valleys; similar to addictive love.
4. **Ludus.** Love is treated as a game for pleasure without serious commitment.
5. **Storge.** Based on deep friendship and mutual trust, similar to companionate love, according to Hatfield et al. (2008).
6. **Agape.** It is unconditional love or loving without expecting to get anything back in return. It does not keep score. It rejoices in seeing the other person happy. It is the willingness to endure suffering for others. The reward of agape love is purely intrinsic—love is its own reward. It is similar to compassionate love, which "centers on the good of the other" (Underwood, 2008, p. 3) or unlimited love (Post, 2014). There is good scientific evidence that human survival depends on sacrificial love or altruism.



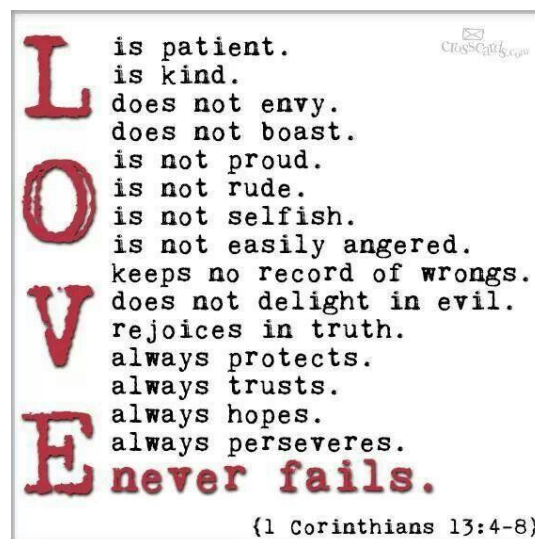
## What Sort of Person Makes The Best Life Partner?

Most marriages begin with passionate love or with a friendship that catches fire. Eventually, it settles comfortable into companionate love that is based on trust and intimate sharing. However, marriage vows demand a higher level of commitment, even in times of troubles.

Marriage is sacred, only when couples recognize agape love as the heart and soul of marriage and defend it fiercely at any cost. This is the most selfless, uplifting, and enduring kind of love (as described in 1 Cor.13: 4-8). One never stop loving, even when it hurts, such as caring for a spouse suffering from dementia or some kind of generative disease.

It is an uncommon love, because most people will give up the marriage when their relationship brings more pain than happiness. Only sacrificial love can save your marriage when a mandatory lockdown places all relationships to a serious stress test.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his play *No Exit* describes the afterlife of three deceased characters being locked in a room together for eternity, bickering. This play is the source of Sartre's famous quote: "Hell is other people". Indeed, life could be hellish when couples or families are cooped up in a small place for an indefinite period of time.



To make things worse, one has to adjust to working at home, on top of other household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, or looking after the children. When normal routines are disrupted, and the usual activities for recreation and distraction are no longer available, people would feel unhappy, anxious, and agitated. Couple squabbles can be easily escalated into verbal abuse or physical violence at a time of rising tension and pressures.

The good news is we still have the freedom of choice. “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, 1985).

Whether other people are Heaven or hell depends more on your reactions to them than their actions. It is both scary and exciting that you are not a pawn and you have the responsibility and agency to choose how to respond to other people.

The person who responds to interpersonal conflicts with sacrificial love has the best chance to save his or her marriage from the mandatory lockdown. Please answer the following *Couples’ Relationship Checklist* questions with a Yes or No to see whether you have agape love in your heart for your spouse:

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|--|----------|
| 1) Have you ever enjoyed making personal sacrifices for your loved one?  | Yes / No |
| 2) Do you feel grateful for what your spouse has contributed to your life?   | Yes / No |
| 3) Are you willing to forgive your spouse indefinitely?  | Yes / No |
| 4) Are you committed to caring for your spouse no matter how difficult?  | Yes / No |
| 5) Do you believe that all your marital problems can be sorted out eventually?   | Yes / No |
| 6) Are you grateful for all the precious lessons you have learned from your marital problems?  | Yes / No |
| 7) Do you fully accept your spouse in spite of all his/her annoying habits and weaknesses?   | Yes / No |
| 8) Are you grateful for the goodness in your partner?  | Yes / No |
| 9) Have you made amends towards your mistakes, so that you would not suffering from regret and guilt if your partner were to die unexpectedly? | Yes / No |
| 10) Do you believe that marriage is sacred worth fighting for?   | Yes / No |

## **What Can I do to Improve My Martial Relationship?**

People are complicated. Even after we have been married for more than 50 years, I still could not fully understand my wife. Furthermore, people change over time. The high school sweetheart you married may no longer be the same person after 30 or 40 years. Even during normal times, maintaining a good marital relationship is a challenging tasking. The quarantine simply amplifies previous marital problems and creates new ones.

To save your marriage, the very least you can do is to reduce negativity in your interaction. Improving communication by avoiding John Gottman’s four horsemen of the apocalypse would be a good start (Happycoupleshealthycommunities.com, 2014). The next step

is to increase the positive ratio to at least 4:1 as suggested by Tierney & Baumeister (St. Clair, 2019).

When couples grow apart, they need to find a way to meet each other halfway according to Arthur and Elaine Aron, who are both internationally renowned experts on love relationships. Along with several of their colleagues, they published the now famous 36-item Intimacy Questionnaire to rekindle love in long married couples (Aron et al., 1997). Here are some sample items. If you carefully reflect on each item, it will improve your marital relationship:



- Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
- For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
- If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
- Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
- If you could wake up tomorrow having gained one quality or ability, what would it be?
- What do you value most in a friendship?
- If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
- What does friendship mean to you?
- What roles do love, and affection play in your life?
- Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.

## The Best Predictor of Successful Marriage is Sacrificial Love

From all my experiences in couple counselling and my observations of people, I have to conclude that the best predictor of successful marriage is commitment rooted in sacrificial love. Many years ago, I wrote this poem:

*What is the meaning of love?  
Why do people fall in love even when it hurts so much?  
The heart longs for a tender touch which never comes,  
The heart aches to hold someone far, far away.  
But true love always hopes and never dies.*

*No sacrifice is too high to care for someone you love  
 Without expecting any returns.  
 So loves endures the wounds and pains  
 But finds comfort in bringing joy to the beloved.*

You may dismiss such love as unrealistic or too costly. But if you really believe that marriage is something sacred, something worth fight for, then you would be willing to make the sacrifice. You would be glad that you could practice empathy, compassion, acceptance, appreciation, gratitude, forgiveness, patience, humility, endurance, faith, self-control, hope, self-transcendence, and contentment—exercising what I call spiritual virtues.

Existential positive psychology poses that the most effective way to cultivate these spiritual cultures is to go through the gates of suffering imposed by life. Marriage will test your limits of these virtues and show you that there is always room for improvement. In other words, marriage can be the best training program for character development and spiritual formation; eventually, it will bring out the best in you and turn you into a saint.

More importantly, the best predictor of successful aging is a happy relationship, according to Harvard’s longitudinal study (Mineo, 2017). In other words, working on the relationship pays handsome dividends in terms of happiness and health, even though the process may be very challenging.

Be grateful that you have found someone who is willing to take chances with you and make you a better person, if you choose to place your life partner above your own self-interest. Marriage is the best cure for the me-first disease, which can be just as destructive as the coronavirus. More importantly, marriage also shows you the less travelled road to mature happiness. Here are some simple exercises to strengthen your relationships:

1. Each day, do something to please your spouse.
2. Each day, express gratitude for at least one good thing about the marriage.
3. Listen to your spouse explain why she or he is unhappy about something. Listen without interruption or defense. Then, “mirror” back to make sure that you have understood correctly.
4. Make future plans together for the period after the COVID-19 crisis is over.