

From Love to Indifference: The Slippery Slope of Falling Out of Love

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

When you hear someone say, “I’ve fallen out of love with my spouse” you have a pretty good idea that they may be entertaining the idea of leaving the relationship. Many couples present to counseling with disillusionment in their marriage. One partner usually vocalizes it, but it’s possible that both feel that way. The one who thinks they’ve fallen out of love might even wonder if they ever genuinely loved their partner in the first place. There are usually other issues in the relationship that the couple might not be facing or have given up on. They may have stopped investing emotionally in the relationship. They may have quit talking about anything of substance and they may think they don’t have anything in common to talk about.

The partner who is complaining about not feeling in love may feel overwhelmed by the tasks and demands of daily living. They think they don’t have the time, energy, or resources to put into the relationship, but they may be apathetic about investing any available resources into the relationship. They often feel neglected and unimportant. They have probably stopped investing in themselves also. They may be just as disillusioned with themselves as they feel toward their partner, and believe that eliminating the relationship will create the happiness they are missing. Usually, the partner who has fallen out of love feels unloved and lonely, even daydreaming about finding love somewhere else.

The disillusioned spouse might have already stopped complaining to their partner about their needs or desires, so the other partner thinks everything is okay. Superficial communication and an absence of working together as a team may be leading down separate paths. They might even have

started to build their own individual and independent lives away from each other. They may be holding onto resentment about the partner's annoying habits and minor attachment injuries, so they make fewer attempts to reconnect on an emotional level. They might have developed a pattern of unilateral problem-solving. That means one partner identifies the problem, comes up with a solution based on how they see the problem, then "sells" their solution to the other partner. Neither partner feels heard or supported.

Even though the marriage seems to be at risk of falling apart, the couple might resist working on the relationship. No-one wants to feel pain. They may use unresolved hurt and resentment as a shield to protect themselves from vulnerability. The withdrawing partner may believe that if they don't feel "in love" anymore, then it's just not worth staying in the relationship.

The good news is that it's possible to regain that sense of "being in love" again. That feeling of hot romance might not necessarily return, but the connection, satisfaction, and tenderness definitely can. The solution is simple: start investing in the relationship and in yourselves again. It's natural that people change over time, but taking time and energy to rediscover who you are and what you want out of life is necessary information to have in order to share it with your spouse. To reclaim those warm, attracted feelings you have to spend time with each other. Passing in the hall and a quick kiss as you head out the door does not seem like much emotional investment. Neglect is a relationship killer. Positive engagement is the cure.

To revive your love, do something different. Stay up all night talking like you used to when you were first together. Go on different dates-something other than dinner and a movie. Text, phone, email each other during the day. Leave each other notes; draw each other pictures. Dance in the kitchen. Try something new romantically. The love that's been buried beneath hurt and neglect is probably still there. When couples come in with one saying that they are not in love anymore, they usually follow their

statement up with a statement about still loving their partner - just not romantically.

One key thing to remember is that marriages go through developmental stages, just like human beings. Couples who've been together for a long time often report that they've "fallen in and out of love" several times. If this has happened to you and your partner, don't do anything rash. Remember, "falling out of love" is a common experience in a long term marriage, but so is falling back in love. So don't give up just yet. Reinvest in yourself and in your relationship. The love that is still there is probably not buried very deep and can be accessed with some effort.



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