

Hatfield, E., Rapson, R. L., & Thornton, P. (in press.) Hope, optimism, and the tireless pursuit of perfect love. In Leo Bormans (Eds.), *The world book of hope* (pp. xxx). Tiel, Belgium: Lannoo Publishers.

## Hope, Optimism, and the Tireless Pursuit of Perfect Love

The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (Vandenbois, 2007) defines optimism as “the attitude that things happen for the best and that people’s wishes or aims will ultimately be fulfilled.”. Generally, the hopeful are blessed. They typically possess higher self-esteem, are more confident, more persistent, achieve more, possess sunnier dispositions, and are healthier (Snyder, 2002; see Mo, 2011 for a review of this research.) All to the good, except— in the arena of love. There, unrealistic self-confidence and reckless hope can create snares and delusions.

Almost everyone in the West hopes that someday they will find love. Hope runs high that they will attract a person who is good looking, charming, witty, kind, wealthy, and sexually desirable to boot. And, typically, at first, in a romantic relationship the seekers convince themselves that they have found the man or woman of their dreams. But time takes a toll and all too often, passionate affairs don’t work out. Reality replaces fantasy and disappointment follows hope. People sigh, grieve, but having convinced themselves that they have learned a valuable lesson, they resurrect the fantasy and move on to the next. And sometimes on and on.

Eventually, though, many come to abandon the fantasy of ever finding a fiery romance. Instead they settle: they make a commitment. After all, the folklore assures them that although passion may burn itself out, it will be replaced by a

mellow, slow burning fire. Things will get better. Yet, even with these now modest expectations, many are disappointed.

There is considerable evidence that passionate love does, in fact, tend to erode with time. Hatfield and her colleagues (2008), for example, interviewed a random sample of nearly 1,000 dating couples, newlyweds, and older women in Madison, Wisconsin. The authors assumed that although passionate love would decline precipitously with time, companionate love would hold its own or even increase. They were wrong! As predicted, passionate love did plummet with time. Both steady daters and newlyweds expressed “a great deal of passionate love” for their mates. But after many years of marriage, women reported that they (and their husbands) now felt only “some” passionate love for their mates. And what of companionate love? Here, contrary to the authors’ predictions, companionate love declined at almost exactly the same rate as passionate love.

Insert Figure 1 here

The conclusion one draws from these data depends on whether one is an optimist or a pessimist. On the positive side: contrary to some portrayals in the mass media, a few lucky older persons, married for a quarter of a century or more, still feel a great deal of love (both

passionate and companionate) for their mates. (Of course, even when love has flickered out, couples may still reap the advantages of a loving family and a lifelong relationship, with someone who knows and cares for them.) On the negative side: with the passage of time, most couples felt less and less love (passionate and companionate) for their partners. Passionate and companionate love remained “coupled” together, for good and for ill, more than was previously thought.

How do people respond when their deepest hopes are dashed? It is here that too much optimism might prove a disadvantage. Often times it is all to the good when people assume they can make improvements in their faltering marriages. But some couples go too far. Buoyed by a lifetime of hope and optimism—and with a supreme confidence in their ability to solve any problem given enough effort and time—they hang on for far too long. Romantic and marital problems are often far more challenging than solving a Megaminx. Personalities are amazingly resistant to change. Emotional problems almost impossible to fix. Drug addiction, alcoholism, character flaws, and abusive personalities, rarely respond to loving care. Often, for the optimistic—successful in every other realm of life—it takes far too long to realize this.

## References

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