



## How Do You Know When You're Really in Love?

© 2026. By Ruth Schimel PhD, Career & Life Management Consultant, Author

[ruth@ruthschimel.com](mailto:ruth@ruthschimel.com) [www.ruthschimel.com](http://www.ruthschimel.com) 202.659.1772

**What is love?** To me, love evolves as a mutual discovery and sharing process with valuable benefits for two people with similar values who engage deeply and authentically with one another. That seems direct and applicable to a range of love from romantic to platonic. This article will focus on the former.

As you have probably experienced, in romantic love there are other more complex aspects. To avoid endless definitions provided in hundreds of articles, books and discussions, metaphors are useful. Following are two: jigsaw puzzles and Pandora's Jar (not the typically called Box).

A jigsaw puzzle is a set of irregularly cut pieces that form a picture or design when fitted together; it is also any complex, confusing situation, condition, or item of seemingly diverse or unrelated elements. It creates opportunities for participants to wrestle with a vision, often left uncompleted.

The themes in Pandora's story also relate to love. Zeus's punishment for the theft of fire, she was the first woman: crafted from earth, beautiful and curious. When she opened her jar to release evils and miseries, hope remained.

Pandora's story abounds with metaphors for love. Earthiness, fire, release. So too with the stuff of romantic relationships: curiosity, assertion, miseries. They are full of delicious challenge and excitement.

The jigsaw puzzle process and Pandora's story are more evocative than my favorite definition of love by psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan. Though rigid, his view has a modern, even general, ethos unconstrained by assumptions of gender and societal formats: *When the satisfaction or the security of another person becomes as significant to one as one's own satisfaction or security, then the state of love exists. Under no other circumstances is a state of love present, regardless of the popular usage of the term.*

To capture your experiences and hopes about love as well as savor that unedited view later, jot down whatever words and phrases about romantic love come to your mind now.

**Challenges and opportunities of sustainable relationships.** In real life, you may have already danced with the challenges and opportunities of romance and love. Whether or not, be prepared to practice your footwork to show your grace.

Maybe it's miraculous that promising romantic matches are sustained at all given the tiptoeing around issues that postpone authentic growth and depth. Best addressed at the start to avoid missteps and detours, many people are chary of sabotaging the possibilities with frankness. If I had done that, I could have replaced my dancing to and fro with better adventures and possible progress.

Many barriers to love are based on societal patterns and values you don't control. What is available for action are most behavioral choices; they benefit from open, caring communication. With them, you have agency, as do others who want to connect well.

Use the examples below to design and marshal better outcomes. When you are aware of your part in the process, your options are within better reach. Add to and adapt any of the following to create opportunities or open doors to possibilities.

- Matching timing and readiness
- Exploring values, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, expectations, needs
- Addressing power and control issues, proximity, availability
- Attending to hangovers of assumptions and wounds from previous relationships
- Modifying rigid or overly comfortable habits
- Moving through challenges in meeting new, appealing people
- Becoming aware of and dealing with unfinished business and possible trauma lurking from early life

**Unfinished business to avoid.** To call forth possibly unfinished business from your own life, here are examples from mine.

Looking back on each of my two long yet intermittent relationships of many years makes me wonder what the true nature of my feelings were. In both situations, the on/off button, mostly pressed by the men until the endings that I chose, brought drama and frustration as well as good special memories. I wonder where my life would be now if I hadn't ignored my initial accurate intuitions about both of them?

<https://bit.ly/4sHmeYP>

When I saw the first man, he was leaning against a fireplace mantel unblinkingly looking me over as I entered a posh party in my new red trench coat. I was not in the "market," having just ended a dating relationship. I thought to myself: "Who does this arrogant, distant older man think he is?"

The second guy I knew from work. We both did early morning briefing stints at the State Department. As I learned later, he was four years younger. He seemed callow and unexpressive.

I won't take your precious time with the details of how each relationship developed into something serious. But for possible relevance to your situation, each had similar themes.

The specious comfort of habitual thought, intimacies and shared experiences over time muted significant differences in our motivations and backgrounds. But my tendencies of wanting to sustain my investment of time and energy and remaining curiosity and hopes about possibilities militated against my letting go.

Another blinding glimpse of the obvious was how both men echoed themes of unfinished early relationships. Examples were relationships with my father, uncle and high school English teacher whose personalities, and even appearances, they echoed.

One other learning contributed to letting go later of the illusion that these relationships were viable romantic relationships. Holding on too long was my form of limerence with those two seemingly available men.

What I assumed was love was an automatic intense state of romantic infatuation fed by continuing focus over long periods of time. Perhaps my neural pathways were overly grooved. I certainly did not admit to myself nor address with them their unavailability, their lack of emotional accessibility and meaningful, satisfying physical expression.

I recognized all this only as I looked back and tried to figure out the meaning of it all. This investment in insight and honesty with myself could presumably help avoid further repetition.

Who in your life were the early significant influences that may have imprinted you enough to have echoes in later life? Awareness of them can alert you of themes to avoid. One possible hope for your future situations and realities: your emotional life is not written in cement during childhood. You write each chapter as you go along as mentioned by Harry Stack Sullivan. Read more at <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/harry-stack-sullivan-quotes>

This could lead to my and your "what if" question and its implications for choices now. What if I had recognized my tendencies and patterns earlier? Would that have led to better choices and quality of life? <https://bit.ly/4v5pdfi>

### **Ways to make the most of promising relationships you're in.**

- Address expectations without oppressing or scaring the other person away. Develop apt timing for discussing significant hopes and issues with a sense of balance and humor over time using feedback from one another. Take incremental steps to establish trust as a foundation for problem solving and progress.

- Know that initial chemistry or at least curiosity and interest that brought you together will modify over time, often into a comfort and ease that provides a more careful, aware solidity and satisfaction, if not excitement.
- Avoid predictable routines in favor of using imagination and experimentation that bring variety and modest joys.
- Recognize and work through important imbalances among expectations, interests, intensity and goals.

**Mature love brings fresh challenges for creating meaning and growth, if not excitement.** Develop a collaboration for mutual, independent growth and problem solving, founded on appreciation, a sense of humor and reasonable expectations.

Here is a poem I wrote at age 21 about love, based on observations, reading and learning, not actual experiences.

*Where is love that's been so courted*

*Until its life dies aborted?*

*It's traveling incognito with*

*Trust, respect, concern and ego.*

As is often the case, the arts contribute to inspiration and insight. To support this and expand your expectations and thinking, here's a charming intergenerational song that transcends couples' relationships, regardless of ages and backgrounds of the people involved.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHiXbvL-ASc> - Harmony