Falling Out of Romantic Love: A Roadmap for Clinicians

Presented by: Crystal Hemesath, Ph.D., LMFT, LMHC
crystal@515therapy.com
Overview: Webinar Discussion Points

- Discuss what is meant by the phrase falling out of romantic love (FORL)
- Identify love types and definitions
- Review relationship trends
- Identify how falling out of love is different than other common couple problems
- Review theory, including my new conceptual framework of FORL
- Discuss how and why falling out of love occurs
- Learn common components experienced by those who have FORL
- Outline assessment and treatment strategies of clients who present with FORL in a clinical setting
- My hope is to provide you with more confidence and competence in your work with FORL
Why is Romantic Love Important?

- Relationships matter a great deal. “At the heart of our humanness is our need for genuine relationships” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 41).
- Satisfying long-term relationships are beneficial for individuals, families, couples and society.
- Without love, humanity would not exist. For our species to flourish, successful procreation is necessary, and children need to survive to find a mate and bear offspring (Newman & Newman, 2007).
Why Does Falling out of Romantic Love Matter?

- Relationships play a significant role in important life outcomes, both positive and negative.
- Loss of love can cause violence, jealousy, and conflict (Buss, 2006), disappointment, depression, anxiety, despair, abandonment, and rejection (Fisher, 1992) – and has even been known to drive people to commit suicide (Westefeld & Furr, 1987) and homicide (see Fisher, 1992)" (Hemesath, 2020, p. 42)
- Mental and physical health are negatively affected when adults have intimate relationship problems (Berscheid & Regan, 2005).
Loss of love is listed as a main cause for relationship dissatisfaction and divorce (Albrecht, Bahr, & Goodman, 1983; see Gigy & Kelly, 1993; See Huston, 2009)

Relationship struggles are the most common presenting problem of those entering psychotherapy (Pinster et al., 1985)

Lack of love is the most difficult problem to treat in couples’ therapy (Whisman, Dixon & Johnson, 1997)
Why I Became Interested in the Topic

- I had experienced FORL in my own romantic relationships as a young adult
- I attended a highly regarded MFT program, where I learned little about the topic
- I felt helpless and incompetent in practice
- I wanted more for my clients
- Turns out, other providers felt the same. Scholars and professionals often struggle to define, understand or address FORL. (Hemesath, 2016; Hemesath & Hurt, 2016)
- Unfortunately, there has been very minimal research, which is why treatment recommendations are lacking
Love, and the lack of it in a relationship expected to provide it, has been a ‘forgotten variable’ in marital therapy even though... most couples marry because they have ‘fallen in love’ and tend to divorce when they ‘fall out of love’.

- Berscheid and Regan, 2005, p. 429
Research on Falling out of Love is Limited

- Love relationships have only been studied since the mid-1970’s (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Garza-Guerrero, 2000)

- Only a few previous studies prior to my work have focused on falling out of love
  - Kayser (1990, 1993)
  - Sailor (2006, 2013)
Why is there a Lack of Research?

1) Some believed the topic of love and marriage was unworthy of scientific study (Burgess & Wallin, 1953)

2) Taboo societal views discouraged studies – is personal and should be kept that way (Regan, 2011)

3) Some thought studying love would take the mystery and fun out of it (Berscheid & Regan, 2005)

4) Some scientists thought relationships were too complex to study (Regan, 2011)

5) Investigators who tried to study love in the latter half of the 20th century were ridiculed (Berscheid & Regan, 2005)
Relationships are Very Complex
Interaction of Personal, Relational and Environmental Factors

Fig. (Regan, 2011)
Common Couples’ Problems Such as Infidelity, Communication Breakdown, and Chronic Conflict are not the Same as FORL

For example, it is possible that a relationship will experience any one, or all three of those problems, but not experience FORL. It is certainly feasible that communication breakdown or chronic conflict could be a factor contributing to FORL; however, FORL is a stand-alone construct representing an accumulation of various individual and relational circumstances and events, and associated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Hemesath, 2016; Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Hemesath & Hurt, 2017)

- Hemesath, 2020, p. 5
What Population Does the Research Represent?

- Primarily heterosexual US mainstream culture (Hemesath, 2020)
- Preliminary research suggests falling out of love may hold similar patterns for LGBTQIA+ couples as it does their heterosexual counterparts (Hemesath, 2020)
- Romantic love and falling out of romantic love are found globally, however more research needs to be done to understand diverse populations and cultures (Hemesath, 2020)
Family and Relationship Trends

- Approximately two-thirds of people in the US marry at least once in their lifetime (US census Bureau, 2012) and of those who have never married, almost two-thirds would like to marry.
- Despite this, many marriages are not long lasting and marital instability has marked the last half of the twentieth century in America (Cherlin 2010).
- Fewer are choosing to marry, and more are cohabitating instead of marrying.
Marriage Past and Present

• Historically, the purpose of marriage was to secure property, rights, wealth and power.

• Changes in the mid-twentieth century led to marriage as a source of individual fulfillment, instead of communal gain (Herek, 2006).

• Today, love is used as the main criteria in the decision to marriage and is the building block of the crucial family unit (Johnson, 2013).
To Understand FORL We First Need to Understand Love

• Literature is full of confusing terminology that overlaps
• Love is often a “generic” term.
• 93 types of love (Fehr & Russell, 1991)
• Definitions are inconsistent across sources
• Boundaries of love types are blurred – each possess some of the same characteristics
• Many individual’s struggle to talk about love
• When asked about a specific type of love, most people have loose conceptions (Reis & Aron, 2008)
• Love is an essential factor for mate selection (Johnson, 2013)
Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love
Sternberg (1986)

- Taxonomy categorizing Romantic Love
- Psychologist, Robert Sternberg used a triangle to depict the three components of love in intimate partner relationships
  - Intimacy (emotional)
  - Passion (physical/sexual)
  - Commitment (decision)
- Not unlike the history of love – terms can be confusing but, in my opinion, the most useful model
- Combination of the three could generate eight different relationship types

Diagram: Wikipedia Commons
Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love (1986)

**Consummate Love**
- Liking
- Companionate Love

**Infatuated Love**
- Empty Love
- Romantic Love
- Fatuous Love

- Intimacy
- Commitment
Passionate Love – new courtship love, obsession, excitement, uncertainty, sexual desire, idealization, considered unsustainable (weeks or months)

Romantic Love - in many countries, is considered essential for marriage (Berscheid, 2006); combines sexual desire and emotional intimacy (Davis & Todd, 1982, Miller, 2012), but not the obsession or anxiety of passionate love (Sprecher & Regan, 1998)

- Feeling loved and understood, important, cared for, and sharing of personal information are examples of emotional connection (Reis, 1990),

- Can be difficult to maintain over time due to the unstable and uncontrollable nature of sexual desire (Miller, 2012; Sternberg, 1987)
Differentiating Similar Terms

Falling in Love vs Being In-Love

- *Falling in love* is different than the more long-term state of *being in love* (Fromm, 1956; Grant 1998).
- Falling in love (onset of passionate love) progresses to being in love (romantic love).

Love vs In-Love

- 82% of college students believe the two concepts are different. (Meyers, Ridge, & Berscheid, 1991)
- “When another is liked (a friend) and sexually attractive, that person qualifies for membership in the ‘in love’ category, but if a person is only liked or only sexually attractive, that individual is less likely to be in the ‘in love category’” (Berscheid, 2006, p. 180).
Consummate Love

Consummate Love – Coined by Sternberg as part of his Triangular theory of Love (Sternberg, 1987). Ideal type of love for long-term romantic relationships. Includes intimacy (emotional), passion (physical) and commitment. Equivalent to romantic love with the extra component of commitment.
Companionate Love

- Strong in commitment, friendship, respect and common goals (Lamanna, Riedmann, & Stewart, 2018). Historically viewed as the natural progression of all marriage.

- Is stable (Hadfield, Traupmann & Sprecher, 1984) and durable (Bersheid & Regan, 2005)

- Is not strong with respect to physical intimacy and can be void of sexual desire (Acevedo & Aron, 2009, Miller 2012). Some partners find companionate love satisfying, safe and secure, but potential lack of physical intimacy can result in discontent, if the partners have different desires or expectations
Falling Out of Romantic Love

- “Includes a substantial decrease or loss in physical/sexual desire and/or loss of emotional connection to one’s partner, along with related thoughts, feelings or behaviors” (Hemesath, 2020, pg. 24).

- Fluctuations or declines may not result in dissatisfaction or FORL and are often considered normal.
Ten Signs You May Have Fallen Out of Romantic Love

Source: Hemesath, 2020, p. 172

1. I have lost emotional connection with and/or physical desire for my partner.
2. The costs of my relationship seem to outweigh the rewards.
3. My partner and/or I have changed in significant ways.
4. I experience my partner’s behavior as increasingly frustrating, annoying or poor.
5. Emerging realizations have led me to have negative feelings about myself, my partner, and/or our relationship.
6. I no longer feel my relationship with my partner is special.
7. Single life has become more appealing to me an/or I have interest in other romantic partners.
8. I have struggled with feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and/or indifference about the relationship.
9. I have no desire or plans to work on the relationship and/or I am considering ending the relationship.
10. There is nothing more my partner or I can do to change our situation.
Theory guides us in identifying and organizing relationships between various phenomenon, providing insight into how things work (Garner, Wagner, & Kawulich, 2016).

Up until now, there has been no specific theoretical framework pertaining to falling out of romantic love.
Love and Tornadoes

- “Romantic relationships are like tornadoes!” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 66).
- “Humans crave stability because it brings a sense of calm and predictability.; yet, as with weather, instability in love makes things interesting” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 66).
- Most romantic relationships start with passionate love (anything but calm and stable) and certain elements and conditions are required for love's formation.
- The love can be powerful and strong or weak and fleeting.
- There is constant interaction between variables within and outside the individual and relationship.
- “This exciting, new love often creates an atmosphere ripe for building momentum drawing us in to its spinning vortex. Like a tornado, the stronger the energy, the more powerful the experience and the greater the risk (Hemesath, 2020, p. 66).
The Megatheory of FORL: Romantic Relationship Formation, Maintenance, and Outcomes

"The tornado metaphor influenced my view of intimate partner relationship formation, maintenance, and outcomes (including FORL) by reminding me of the complexity and constant change inherent to open systems, as well as their powerful, captivating, often unpredictable nature" (Hemesath, 2020, pg. 66).

*This metaphor and drawing laid the groundwork of my framework. (Tornado is side view of model.)
I comprised this theoretical framework from six pre-existing theories, which when uniquely combined are useful in conceptualizing love in intimate partner relationships (formation, maintenance and outcomes) including FORL.

- General Systems Theory
- Biopsychosocial Theory
- Biological/Evolutionary Theory of Love
- Social Exchange Theory
- Attachment Theory
- Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love
**Components Comprising the Megatheory of FORL**

### General Systems Theory
- Interdisciplinary means of explaining complex systems (Ludwig von Bertalanffy, 1968)
- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts
- All parts inside and outside a system affect other parts
- Change is inevitable
- Illustrates the complexity of relationships
Components Comprising the Megatheory of FORL

Biopsychosocial Theory

- Interdisciplinary model based on General Systems Theory principles (Engel, 1977)
- Originated for understanding health and disease - now used across many disciplines, including mental health
- Biological, social, and psychological factors interact to explain various phenomenon
Components Comprising the Megatheory of FORL

Biological/Evolutionary Theory of Love

- Charles Darwin

- Love develops instinctively based on biological evolution promoting survival and reproduction
- Different types of love develop to meet various human needs (i.e. friendship, parent/child, mating-intimate partners) (Kenrick, 2006)
- Evolutionary decisions, outside our awareness assist in our decision making called decision biases
- Brain chemistry and hormones play a role in love (Fisher, 2006)
Unconscious Mind

Sigmund Freud (1985) – analogy of iceberg to describe structure and function of the mind.

• Compared to what we are aware of the unconscious mind is a storehouse of memories, urges, thoughts and feelings

• Although outside our awareness, they influence our everyday judgments, behaviors and experiences in ways we can’t recognize or explain (Westen, 1999, Wilson, 2004)

  • Non-conscious properties such as proximity, and familiarity distinguish those who seem more trustworthy (Regan, 2011)

  • Preferences for specific physical characteristics such as facial symmetry and scent (see Perilloux, Webster, & Gaulin, 2010)

  • Traits people say they wanted in a mate often have little or no impact on their liking the individual upon favorable in-person meeting (Eastwick et. al., 2011)
Non-Conscious Processes May Explain Why FORL is So Confusing

“Many clients who present with FORL desperately want to feel differently and do not understand why, despite repeated attempts and a strong desire to experience romantic love for their spouse, they still cannot seem to renew their lost love. Attention to the non-conscious processes are important to understanding FORL because what we are mentally unaware of may hold the answer to why some individuals who experience FORL are confused and/or frustrated by the occurrence” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 78).
Social Exchange Theory

- Originally an economic theory applied to businesses and work settings, however, has been applied widely to relationships (Homans, 1958; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959).

- Social behavior, including mate selection and retention, is based on maximizing rewards and minimizing consequences, as well as comparing available alternatives.
Components Comprising the Megatheory of FORL

Attachment Theory

- A psychological theory rooted in biology, affected by societal/family/primary caregiver experiences (Bowlby, 1980)
- Children have an innate drive to create emotional bonds, through specific attachment behaviors intended to elicit responses from caregivers which meet their needs for survival
- Caregivers respond to child attachment behaviors in various ways (i.e. consistent, inconsistent)
- Children develop one of three main attachment styles based on experience with primary caregivers: secure, anxious or avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978)
- Caregiver experiences teach children what to expect from others and tend to be replicated in their adult relationships
Confused Yet?

Men and women can express deep attachment for a long-term spouse or mate, while the express attraction for someone else, while they feel sex drive in response to visual, verbal, or mental stimuli unrelated to either partner. And men and women can copulate with individuals with whom they are not “in love”; they can be “in love” with someone with whom they have had no sexual contact; and they can feel deeply attached to a mate for whom they feel no sexual desire or romantic passion.

-Fisher et al., 2002, p. 414
Components Comprising the Megatheory of FORL

Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love

- A triangle depicts the three components of love in intimate partner relationships: intimacy (emotional), passion (physical), and commitment (decision) (Sternberg, 1987)
- Through different combinations of the three components, eight types of love can be generated: non-love, friendship/liking, infatuated love, empty love, companionate love, fatuous love, romantic love and consummate love
- Consummate love, contains all three components, and is considered the most ideal for long-term relationships, although may be difficult to maintain long-term (same as romantic love – but with decision to commit)
- Relationships are in flux and may move between categories
- The emotional (intimate) and cognitive (commitment) components are more stable than passion (physical) (Sternberg, 1986, p. 120)
Difficulties Sustaining Romantic Love

- Marriage itself may affect romantic love due to factors typical of long-term relationships - habituation, over-familiarity (Perel, 2006) de-sexualization of roles (Sims & Meana, 2010)
- Romance and desire are driven by excitement, sex and lust, creating difficulty with incorporating other more grounded elements of a relationship (i.e. commitment, respect, admiration) (Mitchell, 2002)
- Emotional attachments to our partners are essential to sustaining long-term relationships but these are often insecure, injured or lost entirely (Johnson, 2013)
- The very traits we initially seek in our partners turn out to be what lead to its demise (Felmlee, 1995)
- Sexual desire is difficult to predict and control (Sternberg, 1987)

- Identifies a paradox between emotional intimacy and sexual desire
- Many couples struggle maintaining both long term
- The two constructs are not easily compatible
- Although partners yearn to truly know another and be known (spend their life with their best friend) this is the very thing that extinguishes passion and desire (Perel, 2006)
- Perel notes that closeness and friendship does not lead to good sex and attempts at increasing emotional intimacy often do not change the level of sexual desire
- “When intimacy collapses into fusion, it is not a lack of closeness but too much closeness that impedes desire…thus separateness is a precondition for connection: this is the essential paradox of intimacy and sex” (Perel, 2006, p. 25).
Love Sense by Sue Johnson (2013) Founder of the Framework Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) notes the Opposite

- Johnson (2013) suggests the lack of emotional connection, caused by faltering attachment bonds, should be the focus of struggling marriages.
- Emotional connection, or lack thereof, causes the breakdown of romantic love in long-term relationships (Johnson, 2013)
- “It’s not good sex that leads to satisfying, secure relationships but rather secure love that leads to good-and, in fact, the best-sex” (Johnson, 2013, p. 21)
The role of attraction in the initiation of a romantic relationship has been researched extensively, yet research into attraction in long-term relationships, including change of attraction, as well as attraction as a precursor to dissatisfaction, has been meager” (see Mark & Herbenick, 2014; Huston & Levinger, 1978).
Sexual Desire and Relationship Satisfaction

• Sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction tend to be positively correlated – when one goes up the other trends up, and vice versa (Yeh et al., 2006).

• However, some sexually unsatisfied couples still enjoy overall relationship satisfaction (Durr, 2009; Edwards & Booth, 1994).

• Emotional connection is thought to be easier to maintain than sexual desire long-term.
Factors Contributing to FORL

Various pathways, each consisting of multiple factors. The following nine factors were identified as contributing to FORL (Hemesath, 2016) (Hemesath & Hurt, 2017):

1. attributes brought to the relationship by each partner - the suitcase,
2. inadequate mate selection process (i.e., not knowing what to look for in a long-term relationship, dissimilar goals, minimizing or denying problems early in the relationship)
3. minimal relationship rewards,
4. lack of emotional and/or physical connection,
5. extraneous stress (i.e. problems with in-laws, job loss),
6. emerging realizations or awareness leading to negative thinking and/or feelings about self, spouse, or relationship,
7. changes in participant or partner – the wildcard,
8. participant and partner behaviors/negative incidents, and
9. coping deficits in the participant or their partner
The Secret Word - Commitment

- Secret words/passwords protect bank accounts and other important info
- Commitment is protection for relationships
- It’s what gives relationships staying power, b/c most happy couples experience distress and hardship (Gottman & Silver, 1999)
- Takes early r-ships from uncertainty to stability
- Definition: Intention to maintain a r-ship long term (Rosenblatt, 1977) and persevere because it is considered valued (Lamanna & Riedmann (2012))
More on Commitment

- Commitment reflects shared goals rather than individual goals and shelters r-ships from infidelity and helps spouses focus on long term gain (Stanley, Rhoades & Whitton, 2010)
- Commitment does NOT guarantee a more satisfying r-ship or guard against FORL (Hemesath, 2020)
- It influences if r-ships will endure – happy or not (Regan, 2011)
- What impacts commitment levels? Psychological processes (positive illusions), attachment style, each other’s level of commitment, life phases
- Some researchers view commitment as variable based on costs and rewards (Kelly, 2002)
- Others view it as something that needs to be practiced daily (see Goddard, 2007)
- Dedication vs Constraint (Stanley and Markman, 1992) poor quality unions persist due to constraints
All participants made the decision to marry = they were committed.

Along with emotional and sexual intimacy, all but one participant felt commitment was lost (one was still undecided about ending marriage).

Participants fell out of romantic love with their spouse an average of 9 years into the marriage, but average length of marriage was 15 years.

Commitment maintains the marriage longer than it would otherwise endure.

However, staying power of commitment is what could get you from loss of love back to in-love, if you wait long enough – risky endeavor.

“To commit to marriage, in light of the current divorce rate, ‘is so hazardous that no totally rational person would do it’ (Glenn, 1991, p. 269) (Hemesath, 2020, p.145).”

Additional research needed to determine how to bolster commitment levels.
Common Dimensions of FORL

- A process occurring over time comprised of loose **patterns**
- **Point of no return** – signifying the moment when loss of love was acknowledged, and chance of reconnecting are slim
- A variety of **efforts** to remedy were attempted
- Considerable **emotional pain**
- Relatively **common experience**
Four patterns were found (Hemesath, 2020) – but no formal stages (more research)

1. Red flags
2. Efforts
3. Indifference
4. Completion – FORL had occurred and participants were considering the viability of the relationship
The Point of No Return

“A majority of the participants indicated a point of no return in the marital relationship, defined as a point where acceptance of FORL had taken place by the participant and there was no plan or desire to reconcile” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 150).
If You are Unhappy in Your Marriage is it Best to Divorce?

Minimal literature is mixed.

• Despite negative aspects associated with divorce, “Divorced individuals who remarry have greater overall happiness, and those who divorce and remain unmarried have greater levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, than unhappily married people” (Hawkins & Booth, 2005, p. 462)

• Staying in an unfulfilling marriage can be just as painful and damaging as the dissolution of one (Kayser, 1993).

• A study done by Waite and colleagues (2002) suggested that unhappy spouses rated themselves five years later and of those who stayed together 2/3 said they were now happy and those who did divorce were not much happier – warning: study has been criticized by some scholars
Tip 1: try not to get hung up on the idea that deep romantic love is the only way to be satisfied in a relationship
Tip 2: recognize there may be no quick fix
Tip 3: give yourself time to reflect, as well as time to let it go
Tip 4: identify your personal values and goals in your intimate partner relationship, as well as your life in general (will discuss more later)
Tip 5: take a good look at your own contribution to the state of the relationship
Tip 6: ask yourself if you have done everything you can
Tip 7: consider who and what is involved in your decision making
Tip 8: the decision may not feel good, no matter which choice you make
Tip 9: acknowledge that not choosing means you are choosing (Harris, 2013)
Tip 10: make peace with the present – make the most of today
Tip 11: take an inventory of the costs and rewards – level of discontent matters
Tip 12: do not compare your relationship to others
Tip 13: practice self-compassion – most people do not want this experience (Harris, 2013)
Mate selection is a major player in securing satisfying marriage and long-term committed relationships (Hemesath, 2020).
Unfortunately, even with the freedom to select our own mates, “The process of choosing a mate is significant and often difficult for many single adults “ (Cob, Larson, & Watson 2003, p. 222).

- Not knowing what to look for, not having good role models, denial, pressure

Potentially hazardous reasons participants married, beginning with the most commonly cited, were as follows: (a) “I am lucky you love me”, (b) “get me to a better place”, (c) drifting or progressing into marriage (i.e. sliding versus deciding), (d) “things will improve”, (e) “do the right thing” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 114)
Mate Selection

Proper mate selection includes factors such as (Kurdek, 2006):

- Partner interaction
- Social support
- Partner beliefs and attitudes
- Individual personality
- Character traits
Five-Factor Model of Personality

1. Openness to experience (curious)
2. Extraversion (outgoing)
3. Conscientiousness (thorough, efficient)
4. Agreeableness (pleasant)
5. Neurotic (reactive, sensitive)

Of the five traits, **openness to experience** has the least effect on relationships (Miller, 2012) **Neuroticism** has the greatest effect (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) by predicting marital dissatisfaction and divorce, as well as lower resilience after divorce (Shpancer, 2016).
Clinical Recommendations

- Resources and interventions regarding FORL are limited (Berscheid & Regan, 2005)

- The following recommendations are a result of my research and clinical experience (Hemesath, 2016; Hemesath & Hurt, 2016, 2017) and extend previous work (Kayser 1990, 1993) and (Saylor 2006, 2013) (Hemesath, 2020)

- Traditional techniques are often not effective because are not designed for FORL (Kayser, 1993; Roberts, 1992)

- Relationships are dynamic, open systems, in flux, what helps one may not help another - or what worked in the past for a couple may not work in the future (Hemesath, 2020)
Therapeutic Frameworks and Clinical Interventions

- If a client presents with falling out of love it seems helpful to use “interventions which encourage exclusive commitment to the partner, partner-supportive attitudes, and sexual intimacy” (Montgomery and Sorrell (1997, pg. 60). (Elements of Triangular Theory of Love)

- But treatment strategies are only going to be effective under certain conditions

- For example, some models will not be productive near the conclusion of FORL because the decision to end the relationship has already occurred or the goals do not support the interventions – it’s possible the energy or desire is lacking during many phases of FORL

- Conscious processes such as logic may not be effective for problems of an emotional nature.

- Emotional issues, such as fostering emotional intimacy, are best addressed by working through perceptions and anxiety rather than skill building (Reis, 1990)
Although are many empirically based therapeutic frameworks to date, a comprehensive model that adequately addresses all aspects of falling out of love has not emerged (Hemesath, 2020).

Some models seem in direct conflict with others. Esther Perel (2006) suggests too much emotional intimacy kills sex and desire however Sue Johnson (2013) EFT, describes lack of emotional intimacy as the cause of r-ship problems. Both have merit.

Until additional research is available, best to be eclectic and open-minded in our use of therapeutic strategies, techniques and treatment models (Hemesath, 2020).
Assessment Overview

- Accurate assessment is important b/c it informs tx
- Remember MANY different pathways to FORL
- FORL may present individually or as a couple
- In either case it is important to conduct a full assessment of each presenting party
- Partners attending couple’s therapy should come separately for the individual portion of the assessment
- Individual time with the clinician is an important assessment tool because different info may come out
- Assessment should be comprehensive and include standard mental health evaluation items
Assessment Strategies

- **Clarify terminology** – Assure you are speaking the same language
- **Romantic love and commitment** – Use Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love with client
- **Relationship changes** – Consider all possibilities that may explain changes in r-ship
- **Family of origin and attachment style** – Thoroughly assess f.o.o. and attachment style
  - To measure attachment style across a variety of close relationships (mother, father, romantic partner and friend) go to: [http://www.yourpersonality.net/relstructures/](http://www.yourpersonality.net/relstructures/) (Fraley, n.d.). For attachment style, specific to a romantic partner go to: [http://www.web-research-design.net/cgi-bin/crq/crq.pl](http://www.web-research-design.net/cgi-bin/crq/crq.pl) (Fraley, n.d.).
- **View of the problem** - Once physical/mental issues ruled out, ask each partner for their view
- **Assessing values** – not uncommon to be unclear about your values - also not uncommon to have one or more in conflict with the others
Assessment – Stages of Change in Relationship Status, SOCRS (Ritter, Handsel & Moore, 2016)

Factor 1: Precontemplation (no change being considered in relationship)
1) I am happy with my relationship as it is; 2) My relationship is fine; 3) There is no need to change it; 4) My relationship is not that bad. There is no need for me to do anything about my relationship.

Factor 2: Contemplation (beginning to ponder relationship’s end)
5) Sometimes I think I should end my relationship; 6) I believe that my relationship is not healthy for me; 7) I’m beginning to see that my relationship is a problem; 8) I’m beginning to feel the harmful impact of my relationship.

Factor 3: Preparation (making plans to end relationship)
9) Although it is difficult to end my relationship, I am making plans to do it anyway; 10) I have started working on ending my relationship, but I would like some help; 11) I intend to end my relationship within the next month; 12) I intend to end my relationship very soon but am not sure the best way to do it.

Factor 4: Action (movement toward relationship’s end)
13) I have told my partner that I am ending the relationship; 14) I talk less to my partner when we’re together; 15) I have started spending more time with other people and less time with my partner; 16) I find myself thinking about my partner less and less.

Factor 5: Maintenance (continuing with the end of relationship)
17) I changed my daily routine to avoid any association with my partner; 18) I avoid places where I know I will see my partner; 19) I have thrown away items that belong to my partner or taken steps to get rid of things that remind me of him/her; 20) I will never return to my partner.
Treatment Planning for FORL

“Depending on who presented for treatment (individual or couple) and the assessment results, the recommendations may include couple's therapy, individual therapy, both couple’s and individual therapy, or something entirely different, such as discernment counseling” (Hemesath, 2020, p. 215)

*Treatment plans are informed by the client's goals.
Suggested Clinical Techniques and Interventions

- **Promote Skill Building** – Can be very useful but only in cases where FORL has not already taken hold – good for conflict resolution, poor communication, role confusion, or parenting financial concerns.

- **Encourage Positive Partner Affect** – Action is important for maintaining love components (Sternberg 1987). Gottman discovered absence of positive affect (warmth and interest) predicts marital dissatisfaction and divorce more than arguing.

- **Reduce Stress** - Look for ways to reduce stress as much as possible.

- **Expect Occasional Bumps** – Love is like flying in an airplane, turbulence will happen.

- **Identify and Share Marital Expectations** – Discuss expectations from time to time (may change).

- **Acknowledge that Some Level of Denial is Good** – As long as significant negative traits are not being ignored.
The following frameworks may be useful for addressing attachment issues or other causes of emotional disconnection. Can be used either individually or in couple’s work (Hemesath, 2020).

**Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)** – Good for insecure attachments. Love Sense: The revolutionary new science of romantic relationships (Johnson, 2013). Shortcoming is that the loss of sexual attraction to spouse is not addressed.

**Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)** – Intended to reduce intense emotional reactions and assist in tolerating distress and more effective interactions. Helpful with anxious attachments.

**Internal Family Systems (IFS)** – Developed by Richard Schwartz (1995). Combines systems theory with the idea that each person contains three main parts, managers, exiles and firefighters. The goal is to assist clients in tapping into healing qualities of the self to disentangle from protective yet destructive parts.
Addressing Issues of Sexual Intimacy and Desire

- The Paradox of Desire – Security and passion have a difficult time co-existing at the same time. May be useful to work from Esther Perel’s (2007) Mating in Captivity. Also 40 min YouTube video, How to Find the Sweet Spot Between Love and Desire (2017).

- The “Eww” Factor vs “I’m Just Not that into It” – The Conscious Sexual Self Workbook (2014) by Melissa Fritchel, sex therapist. Assess individually to see how they view themselves and partner sexually.

- Grieve What is Missing – Consider grief work to mourn the changes in themselves and/or their partner which created a situation where sexual desire is not what it once was or hoping it would be.

- Foster Transparency - Invite the struggling partner to consider what used to attract them to their partner (M. Fritchle, personal communication, September 13, 2018). How might that look, today? Vague complaints are not helpful. But bigger conversations can be painful.
Develop Curiosity - Can the low desire partner develop a curiosity about what could happen in their relationship, sexually (M. Fritchle, personal communication, September 13, 2018). If they are willing, begin with focusing on the sensation of physical touch, not desire, itself.

Explore New Ideas - Fritchle recommends inquiring if the low desire individual is willing to endure awkward feelings, while exploring options. (i.e., Have they considered using fantasy during sex?)

Lighten it Up - Perhaps looking at sex in a lighter, less serious way, knowing it doesn’t have to be great for both partners every time can take pressure off (M. Fritchle, personal communication, September 13, 2018). However, to be clear, sexual relations should not be recommended or expected, if they are unwanted (see Muise & Desmarais, 2013).

Other Means of Experiencing R-ship Satisfaction – Are there other enjoyable aspects?

Scheduling Sex - some believe that especially for women, desire comes after good sexual relations are underway (Basson, 2000).
Addressing Commitment

- Sometimes rituals can help with commitment (i.e., regular date night) (Goddard & Olson, 2004)
- Customize the treatment plan based on what speaks most to an individual for rewards (i.e., financial security, stability) (Goddard, 2007)
- Consider using motivational interviewing. Motivational interviewing was developed by William Miller and Stephen Rollnick in 1991, primarily for problem drinking. It focuses on exploring and resolving ambivalence in hopes of eliciting change.
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – Developed by Steven Hayes in the 1980’s. Has roots in behavioral therapy and cognitive therapy. Hayes (2005) views psychological inflexibility (the inability to adapt to life’s problems) as the main source of suffering. The premise of ACT is that by accepting inevitable difficulties of life, as well as changing our behavior accordingly, we will have better outcomes than if we try to ignore or avoid problems. ACT differs from cognitive behavioral therapy. The main goal of CBT is to control or change thoughts and feelings whereas ACT has the goal of accepting them for what they are, while moving toward something more positive, and in line with your values (see Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson, 2012) (Hemesath, 2020, p. 226)

The techniques used include expansion and acceptance, mindfulness, cognitive defusion, values clarifications, and committed actions (Harris, 2007).

Use for emotional pain, internal conflict, decision making as well as addressing commitment and sexual intimacy issues.
Beyond emotional and physical intimacy – there can be a wide variety of couple’s issues which may be stepping-stones to FORL (i.e., conflict resolution, communication, parenting). Consider these models, earlier in the process of FORL – possibly when FORL isn’t on the radar, yet.

- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy** – Discovered by Aaron Beck in the 1960s. Focuses on changing undesirable behaviors and distorted thinking. Thoughts affect emotions, which affect behavior.

- **Solution-Focused Therapy** – Coined in the 1980s by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Ki Berg. Shortens the length of therapy but also credited for offering positive forward momentum. “Do something different” technique and “miracle question”.

When One of Both Partners are Leaning Out

Often traditional couple’s strategies are ineffective for FORL because the goals for the partners may be separation or divorce (Hemesath, 2020, p. 229).

Discernment Counseling - a unique, 1-5 session model designed for couples who are on the fence about the relationship, where one spouse is leaning in and the other spouse is leaning out (Doherty, 2011). Not marriage therapy. The end goal is to come to one of three decisions, end the marriage, continue as status quo (not ready for decision), or move toward marriage therapy and actively work on the relationship.

Marital Separation - If marital separation is decided upon, recommend a structured separation with ample communication and clear expectations regarding dating, finances, child rearing, and length of separation (Gadoua, 2010). Although, many spouses try to reconcile during separation (Weinberg, 1996), most trial separations end in divorce (Manning & Smock, 2005).
Wrapping Up

• There was no secret stash of research on FORL
• It isn’t rocket science. It’s likely far MORE difficult (Regan, 2005)

No one ever expected Issac Newton to predict exactly which apple would fall off the tree and hit him on the head and when it would do so. Physical scientist know that such predictions are too difficult to make outside the lab because there are too many unknown, interacting variables – same with behavioral sciences! (p. 71-72.

• I noticed a consistent theme of opposites and contradictions, but I ignored it – thinking it was a frustrating distraction.

• As with all complex systems, we cannot escape contradiction or unpredictability – researching FORL became easier and more enjoyable
Life evolves in a process of ebb and flow (Mager, 2018). I believe love is no different. Because relationships are complex systems, there may never be a fail-proof method of preserving romantic love or preventing FORL (Hemesath, 2020, p. 240).

All relationships, like individuals are unique - why some remain satisfying long term are likely a result of the combination of factors described earlier (“suitcase,” couple interaction, societal, environmental, stress, beliefs, goals, change, etc.).

My advice is to lean into uncertainty and embrace it, while doing the best we can.

We can’t go back to marrying for land and wealth. We have moved to a place where personal fulfillment and love reigns. The time has come to catch up with ourselves. We must create a more informed and prepared future to better support our goals for modern-day intimate partner relationships (Hemesath, 2020).
The key to conceptualizing long-term romantic love lies in the comparison to tornadoes. Although there are many similarities, there is one main difference between tornadoes and love in intimate partner relationships. A tornado that fizzles out is a relief, however a dried-up love relationship is not as welcomed. Instead of viewing long-term romantic love as one massive, amazing, twister, requiring sustainment; maybe we should look at it as a series of mini weather systems, with periods of calm in between. In comparison to weather, passionate love is the unpredictable, exciting whirlwind, companionate love is the tranquil and stable weather patterns, and romantic love is a delicate balance between the two. Currently, it seems passionate love cannot last forever, companionate love can last indefinitely, and romantic love... well, anything’s possible! Ultimately, like the wind, romantic love seems to vary throughout the course of long-term relationships. Sometimes it’s strong and fierce, other times it’s a gentle breeze, and sometimes it’s quiet and still. And maybe that’s okay. (Hemesath, 2020, p. 101)
Thank You!

My book is available for purchase through Amazon or Routledge Taylor Francis.

Contact me with any questions!!

Crystal Hemesath, Ph.D., LMFT, LMHC
crystal@515therapy.com