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# Love is a Battlefield: Experience of Love in Relation to Depression

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*Depression is a debilitating mental illness that entails much more than just sadness. In an attempt to discover if there is a relationship between experience of love and depression, a survey was created to assess these variables. The survey included the Experience of Love Questionnaire (ELQ), an author-developed scale, and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (Radloff, 1977). The ELQ consisted of three subscales measuring experience of love in family, friends, and romantic relationships. The hypothesis of this study was that there would be a negative correlation between experience of love and depression. The survey was completed by 103 participants and the results revealed a correlation between the two variables. The correlation was significant in the friend and family ELQs but, surprisingly, not in the romantic relationship ELQ. This was unexpected, so romantic relationships were further analyzed, revealing that there was a significant correlation, but only in the married part of the sample. These results could lead to a belief that it is possible to decrease depressive symptoms if relationships and perceptions of love improve.*

## Introduction

In the United States, depression is a common mental health problem. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2012), approximately 16 million (6.9 percent) adults aged 18 or older in the U.S. had at least one major depressive episode in the past year. Symptoms such as persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness, loss of interest, decreased energy, difficulty concentrating, and difficulty sleeping make depression a serious mental illness (National Institute of Mental Health, 2012). Depending on the severity of depression, people can be rendered completely incapable of participating in mundane activities.

Negative experiences or perceptions of love could lead to the existence of relationship problems, thus making it one potential reason for the occurrence of depression. For the purposes of the present study, perceived experience of love is distinguished from love itself and called *experience of love*. For example, if someone has an insecure attachment style, their experience of love is more likely to be negative, which possibly leads to feelings of

insignificance and results in depression. By studying perceived experience of love and its relationship to depression, it is possible to start identifying some of the possible roots of depression and, consequently, improving treatments for certain types of depression.

The goal of the present study is to explore the correlation between the experience of love and depression. It is hypothesized that individuals who misinterpret the love they receive will have negative experiences of love more often than those who correctly interpret received love which, in turn, may lead to depression. The purpose is to investigate the amount of love a person believes that they receive from significant groups of people in their lives (family, friends, and significant others) and how it relates with depression.

## Literature Review

### Attachment Theory

Human beings seem to have a proclivity for being in community with others and, without community, serious psychological issues can arise. John Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) roots these needs for human connection in

childhood parental bonds and interactions. According to the theory, children become attached to certain trusted individuals, usually parents, and tend to seek proximity with them during stressful events. Typically, if nearness of the attachment figure is not obtainable, the stress intensifies and psychological distress occurs. A study by Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, and Lyumbomirsky (2012) suggests that while people sought happiness in a variety of different ways, most people chose to find happiness in personal relationships. The study further emphasized the need for relationships in maintaining psychological well-being and preventing distress.

Research regarding attachment styles and how they are related to depression have shown correlations between higher depression levels and insecure attachment styles. Canton-Cortes, Cortes, and Canton (2015) found that girls with a secure attachment style had lower rates of depression than those with insecure styles and that anxious attachment was the most detrimental to psychological health. A similar study was conducted on patients with spinal cord injuries that discovered a correlation between anxious and avoidant attachment styles, depression, and resilience; depression increased and resilience decreased in conjunction with these insecure styles (Dodd, Driver, Warren, Riggs, & Clark, 2015).

Other studies with new variables produced the same findings that insecure attachment is often correlated with depression. Evraire and Dozois (2014) researched correlations between attachment, reassurance seeking, and depression. The combination of reassurance seeking and insecure attachment correlated with increased depression, but the behavior of seeking reassurance alone might not be associated with depression. Instead, there was probably a combination effect in which the behavior, as well as individual characteristics like attachment style, created an association

with depression. Gnilka, Ashby, and Noble (2011) added even more variables when they studied maladaptive perfectionism, depression, hopelessness, life satisfaction and attachment. The results suggested that insecure attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) were associated with maladaptive perfectionism, hopelessness, lower life satisfaction, and depression.

Although attachment theory originally addressed children, the theory has been applied to adults as well. A study by Reynolds, Searight, and Ratwik (2014) applied attachment theory to adults by focusing on the correlation between insecure attachment styles and rumination, then turning to look at rumination's association with depression. They found a strong correlation between rumination and depression, which could potentially stem from insecure attachment styles. Not only was attachment thought to be associated with depression in general, but research also suggests that attachment styles are good predictors for both early and late-onset depression meaning that early childhood parental events could affect the rest of a person's life (Paradiso, Naridze, & Holm-Brown, 2012). All in all, the correlations found in these studies exhibit the significance of strong family relationships on attachment styles and, thus, on psychological well being.

### **Attachment Theory and Friends**

Research suggests that a secure attachment with family translates into healthier relationships with friends. A child's first exposure to human relationships and attachment are often through the family unit, especially parents, and that initial relationship experience functions as an example and foundation for other relationships throughout the child's life. A hypothesis called the emotional security hypothesis suggested that if inter-parental conflict existed, then the ability to effectively regulate emotions was lowered,

attachments became insecure, and depression increased. In turn, this made it less likely that children would retain friendships for longer than a year, because their ability to regulate and cope with negative emotions was undermined. According to this hypothesis, poor relationships lead to increased depression and increased depression could lead to poor relationships creating a negative cycle (Schwarz, Stutz, & Ledermann, 2012).

Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, Zilca, and Lyumbomirsky (2012) conducted a study to determine who was most likely to seek happiness and what they did to try to increase their happiness. "When asked which of the 14 activity categories was most important or meaningful to them, about half of participants (52.6%) chose 'nurturing my social relationships'" (Parks et al., 2012). According to this research, relationships appear to be highly important in human lives; however, the effect of a relationship is only as positive as the relationship itself. Other research explored different kinds of attachment styles in relation to sensitivity to rejection and friendship quality (Ozen, Sumer, & Demir, 2010). The results suggested that sensitivity to rejection did not create more of an effect on friendship quality than the one already accounted for by attachment style. High avoidance attachment style in conjunction with high sensitivity to rejection correlated with a very low quality of friendship. Securely attached individuals had the highest friendship qualities while their counterparts experienced the opposite. Rejection sensitivity was not thought to overlap with attachment, but the study mentioned that rejection sensitivity was rooted in early attachment and, thus, they both impacted friendship quality along the same lines (Ozen, Sumer, & Demir, 2010).

A study by Rosenthal, Somers, Fleming, and Walsh (2014) applied knowledge of the attachment and social identity theories to evaluate the correlation between friendships

and depression. More specifically, research was conducted to distinguish if interpersonal attachment and group identification processes each correlated with depression. The results suggested that there was a negative correlation between depression and friendship group identification while there was a positive correlation between anxious and avoidant attachment and depression. This study further supported the idea that social support helped reduce overall depressive symptoms and that insecure attachment styles could cause personality types that resulted in increased depression rates. These studies help explain the importance of quality friendships and secure attachment styles on mental health and well-being while explaining the negative consequences that result from a lack of such relationships.

### **Attachment Theory and Romantic Relationships**

The way romantic relationships develop and exist have a significant impact on mental health and well-being. According to research, insecure romantic relationships can cause stressors that possibly have a negative impact on the relationship. A study by Conde, Figueiredo, and Bifulco (2009) found that about half of the couples in their studied population exhibited the same attachment style and that both men and women showed positive correlations between insecure attachment and symptoms of anxiety and depression. The commonality of attachment styles in partners could possibly have helped to strengthen the relationship and build solidarity since each partner would have experienced the relationship and stressors in similar ways. For example, when one person made a positive/negative remark and showed positive/negative actions towards his or her significant other, the other person also



experienced those emotions (Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Mikulincer, 2013).

Despite these potential benefits, insecure attachment styles create a mental model of a dysfunctional style of relationships, causing behaviors that lead to depressive symptoms. Research showed that the attachment styles that relate to negative self-models (preoccupied and fearful) were associated with depression and that people who possessed a preoccupied attachment style were prone to sociotropy while those with fearful attachment styles were prone to autonomy (Permuy, Merino, & Fernandez-Rey, 2009).

It is possible that attachment styles in childhood affect personality development, inclination towards depression, and the happiness of future romantic relationships. Langeslag, Muris, and Franken (2013) conducted research on infatuation and attachment in romantic relationships and found that a negative correlation existed between higher levels of infatuation and lower levels of attachment. They also found that higher rates of infatuation were associated with higher negative affect and higher attachment was associated with lower negative affect.

A study by Kadir and Bifulco (2013) explains the reasons that childhood attachment might affect adult attachment and happiness. It found that insecure attachment styles correlated to lack of social interaction and vulnerability with other people and this correlation could have been responsible for increased prevalence of depression in people who had insecure attachment styles (Kadir & Bifulco, 2013, 922). Additionally, they found that depression could stem from the difficulty to cope properly, a result of a need to be independent but having a fear of rejection that impeded that independence. Early childhood events can make people more susceptible to stress, anxiety, and depression later in life. People who experienced more relational stressors tended to have higher attachment

anxiety and depression but people who experienced low levels of attachment anxiety were less likely to be affected by relationship stressors. Thus, high attachment anxiety could mean more reactivity to relational stressors, possibly leading to higher depression rates (Chow & Ruhl, 2014). Ultimately, most research suggests that relationships later in life, such as romantic relationships have a strong connection to relationships early in life, such as those with family members because of the effects that attachment has on people throughout their lives.

### Depression

Depression has many potential causes, one of which could be rooted in early childhood attachment. The vast majority of research has found a correlation between insecure attachment styles and increased susceptibility to depression, though this does not necessarily justify a causal relationship. However, some experiments controlled for other possible causes of depression and still supported the other research. For example, Kendler and Halberstadt (2013) found that intimate and romantically involved relationships were the greatest cause for episodes of major depression when observing sets of monozygotic twins. As people mature, social relationships become significantly more important and there is more of an interest in pursuing romantic relationships. Kendall et al. (2014) found significant support that while romantic relationships were correlated with depression in youth, the opposite was true for adults.

In adults, as romantic involvement increased, depression was thought to have decreased, which emphasized the importance of healthy relationships in maintaining mental wellness (Kendall et al., 2014). Research has found that negative love styles were correlated with lower levels of wellness and positive love styles were correlated with higher levels of

wellness (Shurts & Myers, 2008). Shurts and Myers (2008) concluded that wellness was related to social support and that the relationship between the two variables was possibly a more complicated one than was previously thought prior to the study.

Being that there are a lot of links between attachment, depression, and relationships, the present study is a correlational study on perceived love in familial, friendly, and romantic relationships in comparison with depression. The hypothesis of the present study is that the less perceived love there is, the higher depression rates will be. This will be explored through subclass of (1) familial love, (2) love in friendships, and (3) romantic love. The purpose of this research is to discover new information about relationships and depression in order to help individuals with insecure attachment learn about the reasons behind their feelings and insecurities. Also, the results can be used to educate securely attached individuals on what it is like to live life with insecure attachment styles. Ultimately, this research could help to improve relationships and decrease the prevalence of depression.

## Methods

### Participants

The sample included 114 participants who took an online survey. Among the sample, 103 participants completed the entire survey assessing experience of love and depression. More women (84.47%) participated in the study than men (15.53%). A wide distribution of ages participated: 18-25 (50.98%), 25-40 (17.65%), 41-64 (26.47%), and 65+ (4.90%). The majority of the studied population was Caucasian or white followed by Hispanic or Latino and then African-American or black. The ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 75.73% were Caucasian or white, 7.77% were African-American or black, 0.97% were Native American or American Indian, 1.94% were

Asian or Pacific Islander, 8.74% were Hispanic or Latino, 0.97% are some other race alone, and 3.88% were two or more ethnicities.

Other demographics of the sample population included marital status, of which 38.24% of the studied population was married, 53.92% of the population was never married, 5.88% of the population was divorced, and 1.96% of the population was widowed. Out of the 103 people sampled, 60.19% of people's parents were married, 15.53% of people's parents were divorced, 8.74% of people's parents were remarried, 0.97% of people's parents were never married, and 14.56% of people's parents were widowed. The highest completed level of education for the sampled population is as follows: high school or less (14.56%), some college credit/no degree (52.43%), attended/completed college (18.45%), and attended/completed graduate or professional school (14.56%).

### Assessment Instruments

#### *Experiences of Love Questionnaire (ELQ)*

The ELQ was designed for the purposes of this study and was drafted to assess the amount of love a person believes that they receive from significant groups of people in their lives. The ELQ has three subscales: family, friend, and romantic relationships, each measuring the amount of love that a person believes that they receive from each type of relationship. The ELQ has 18 items, each assessed on a 1-6 Likert scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 6 representing "strongly agree." Example items for the ELQ include "I feel loved by my family," "My friends easily forgive me," and "My significant other makes me feel worthy of love."

The author-developed ELQ demonstrated excellent internal consistency. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the 18-item scale was very high:  $\alpha = .91$ . The subscales also

demonstrated very high reliability: family subscale,  $\alpha = .95$ ; friendship subscale,  $\alpha = .93$ ; and significant other subscale,  $\alpha = .95$ . Content validity was established by soliciting expert rating and making revisions accordingly. The full scale with scoring instructions for all of the subscales can be found in Table 1.

### *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)*

The CES-D was designed to assess depressive symptomatology within the general population (Radloff, 1977). The CES-D has 20 items, each assessed on a three-point rating scale where 3 points is given for rarely (less than 1 day), 2 points are given for some (1-2 days), 1 point is given for occasionally (3-4 days), and no points are given for most (5-7 days). Example items for the scale include "I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends" and "I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me."

## Results

The hypothesis that lower *perception of love* would be associated with higher *depression* was partially supported by the data. Perceived familial love was negatively correlated with depression,  $r(93) = -.235$ ,  $p = .012$ . Furthermore, perceived love in friendship was negatively correlated with depression,  $r(96) = -.302$ ,  $p = .001$ . However, perceived love in romantic relationships was not significantly correlated with depression,  $r(59) = -.176$ ,  $p = .091$ .

In order to explore the non-significant results for perceived love in romantic relationships and depression, further analyses were conducted based on relationship status because approximately half of the sample was under the age of 25 and unmarried. Of those who are married, perceived romantic love was

significantly correlated with depression,  $r(35) = -.361$ ,  $p = .033$ . However, for those who reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship but not married, the correlation between perceived love in a romantic relationship and depression was not significant,  $r(23) = -.050$ ,  $p = .820$ .

## Discussion

Overall, the results suggest that people who perceive less love in their lives also experience higher levels of depressive symptoms. All of the results showed a negative correlation between experience of love and depression. The negative correlation between experience of love in familial relationships and depression was significant which is consistent with research by Canton-Cortes, Cortes, and Canton (2015) who found that secure attachment styles were correlated with lower rates of depression. While correlation does not imply causation, it makes sense that experience of love in families and depression are related based on what the attachment theory says about the significance of relationships on people's mental health. If someone has an insecure attachment, then they are unsure about their relationships and could develop poor self-esteem or insecurities. If these develop then they could begin questioning whether or not they are loved by their family and then if they are worthy of love. If they conclude that they are not loved or are not worthy of love then depression could become very likely since interpersonal relationships are so important for happiness (Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, & Lyumbomirsky, 2012).

The negative correlation between experience of love in friendships and depression was also significant, which is also consistent with the literature about attachment styles and friendship quality. Ozen, Sumer, and Demir (2010) found that insecurely



attached people had lower qualities of friendships than those with secure attachments. Given the relationship between experience of love and attachment styles, lower quality friendships could translate to feeling less love in those relationships. Since Shurts and Myers (2008) concluded that wellness was related to quality of social support, these feelings of inadequate love could lead to depressive symptoms and lower levels of wellness.

Prior to analysis, the expectation was that the most significant correlation would exist between depression and experience of love in familial relationships. This hypothesis was based on Bowlby's attachment theory (1969), which states that the need for human bonds is rooted in childhood parental interactions. However, the current study showed a stronger correlation between depression and experience of love in friendships. Perhaps because friendships are voluntary while families are inherited, more pain is experienced when rejected by someone you chose to be around than someone you did not. Or, it could be that familial relationships are our first exposure to human interaction so they set up a foundation for the rest of our relationships, which could mean that less perceived familial love has multiplying effects on friendships. If familial relationships are negative and so are friendships, then depression could multiply because of the increased relational difficulties and decreased social support. This possibility stems from the emotional security hypothesis, which suggests that inter-parental conflicts hinder the ability to regulate and cope with negative emotions and, therefore, increase the likelihood of unstable friendships (Schwarz, Stutz, & Ledermann, 2012).

While the results were statistically significant for experience of love in familial relationships and friendships, there was no statistically significant correlation with depression and experience of love for those in

romantic relationships. However, within that group, the married sample revealed a significant correlation between experience of love and depression, while the non-married sample did not (see Table 3). Additionally, most of the studied sample consisted of young participants (50.98%) whose relationships may not be serious enough to have a significant impact on their mental well-being yet. Young relationships are not always taken seriously and can occasionally be viewed as a means of having fun rather than an avenue for seeking emotional support. Typically, there is less of an investment in a dating relationship than a marriage because it is easily ended whereas a marriage is intended to be forever. Because of this, young people might not seek someone with whom they will be compatible for a long period of time. Therefore, they probably would not exhibit what Conde, Figueiredo, and Bifulco (2009) found where both partners possess the same attachment style because attachment commonalities are not as pertinent for ephemeral relationships. Perhaps, if an older sample was studied, results might reveal a significant correlation between depression and romantic relationships.

## Conclusion

While there were significant results found in this study, there were still limitations that should be considered. For example, there was a small sample size for those who reported to be in a romantic relationship at the time of the survey. This small sample might not be representative of the entire population, making the results less reliable. The demographics were not very diverse which could also affect reliability. In addition, the sample was largely female, Caucasian, and under the age of 25. Finally, most of the sample had parents who were married which could impact their view on love differently than it would if they came from a nontraditional household. Overall, the results



of this study would be more reliable if a larger, more diverse sample was available.

In future studies, it would be imperative to evaluate a more representative sample. Not only that, but it would be captivating to look at more specific populations as well. For example, one possible direction would be to look specifically at people who grew up in a nontraditional household. "Nontraditional" meaning that both biological parents are not living under the same roof as the participant. These people may have a different experience of love than people whose parents are still married. Also, it is a possibility to look more into experience of love in married couples or to specify between casually and seriously dating since the results were only significant for married couples when it came to romantic relationships. To expand on that a little further, there could be a study that assesses unmarried couples that have been together for a certain period of time, and then the significance could be compared to that of married couples. Finally, a study could be conducted to find the amount of time that it takes for a relationship to result in a significant correlation between experience of love and depression.

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## Appendix

Table 1

Questions	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree		
1. My family is patient with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I feel loved by my family.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. My family loves me unconditionally.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. My family loves me selflessly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. My family easily forgives me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. My family makes me feel worthy of love.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. My friends are patient with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I feel loved by my friends.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. My friends love me unconditionally.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. My friends love me selflessly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. My friends easily forgive me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. My friends make me feel worthy of love.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. My significant other is patient with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I feel loved by my significant other.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. My significant other loves me unconditionally.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. My significant other loves me selflessly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. My significant other easily forgives me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. My significant other makes me feel worthy of love.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Scoring: The summation of the answers for questions 1-6 give you a score for perceived love in family. The summation of the answers for questions 7-12 give you a score for perceived love in friendships. The summation of the answers for questions 13-18 give you a score for perceived love in romantic relationships. The lower the score, the less perceived love in each category with 5 being the lowest possible score and 36 being the highest.

Table 2  
ELQ Correlation Coefficients

	CES-D
Family ELQ	.235*
Friendship ELQ	.302**
Romantic Relationships ELQ	.176

Note: Family ELQ, N = 93; Friendship ELQ, N = 96; Romantic Relationships ELQ, N = 59

\* = significance at the .05 level (p < .05)  
 \*\* = significance at the .01 level (p < .01)

Table 3  
Romantic Relationships ELQ Correlation Coefficients

	CES-D
Romantic Relationships ELQ (Entire Pop.)	-.176
Romantic Relationships ELQ (Non-Married Pop.)	-.050
Romantic Relationships ELQ (Married Pop.)	-.361*

Note: Entire Pop., N = 59; Non-Married Pop., N = 23; Married Pop., N = 35

\* = significance at the .05 level (p < .05)