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Amigeist: A New Extreme Love Phenomenon

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Falling in love may begin with an inescapable, uncontrollable, transformative experience of intense emotions and intrusive thoughts, such as limerence. Romantic love researchers have tended to lump extreme love into pathology. Transpersonal psychology was chosen as the lens to examine an extreme occurrence of falling in love for its transformational and spiritual potential using a phenomenological approach. Twenty-five U.S. born participants, age 30 or older, reported experiencing a highly intense and deeply significant romantic love occurrence. Results revealed a unique experience with limited correlations to limerence. The new phenomenon is called *amigeist*, characterized by immediate, intense soul-mate bonding, such as secure attachment, with lifepartner potential. The larger themes were dynamic connection, secure attachment, astonishment, and passionate long-term relationships.

Keywords: *love, romantic love, extreme love, limerence, soul-mate, soulmate, oneness, transpersonal, amigeist*

Falling in love could be one of the most common and overlooked transpersonal events in human experience, and extreme occurrences of falling in love might even be closely related with spiritual emergence or oneness. Romantic love is a socially constructed, near-universal phenomenon (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992) and therefore is difficult to define based on changing cultural norms (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). Scholars have varied definitions, such as *loving and liking* (LL; Rubin, 1970); *passionate and companionate love* (PCL; Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969); *passion, intimacy, and commitment* (Sternberg, 1986); and a variety of *love styles* (Lee, 1977). Therefore, research tools have been as elusive as defining the phenomenon (Graham, 2011). Examples are: *love and liking scales* (Rubin, 1970), *love attitude scales* (LAS; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), *passionate love scale* (PLS; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), and *triangular love scale* (TLS; Sternberg, 1986; for a historical review of scales see Hatfield, Bensman, & Rapson, 2012).

Early influences of Western culture on romantic love were based on Christian doctrine, such as the sacrament of holy matrimony; and the notion of courting, a procedure of proving oneself worthy of their beloved, often involved a man's pursuit of an unavailable woman, therefore, included

an unrequited aspect that might fuel the challenge, which created a structure still referenced in modern times (Boase, 1986; Singer, 1984). These influential and foundational examples show most individuals were not empowered to choose their own romantic partner, and often arranged marriages were the norm. However, the modern Western perspective of romantic love has been liberated to a more autonomous process, including non-traditional choices such as same-sex marriage.

Another dominant strand in the literature is the biological perspective, which posits an evolutionary theory as the reason for romantic love (Buss, 1988). An evolutionary theorist Lindholm (1988) suggested,

Romantic attraction is an adaption serving to negate the human male's innate predisposition to maximize his genetic potential by engaging in sexual promiscuity. Instead, romantic idealization keeps him tied to his beloved, where his labor and protection are required for the necessary task of child raising. (p. 244)

Another biologically based theory, caregiver-attachment, depicts infant bonding in three distinct ways, secure attachment (needs consistently met), anxious-ambivalent attachment (needs inconsistently

met), and avoidant attachment (abandoned; Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) that affect later romantic relationships. Other research, such as a study by Feeney and Noller (1990), found similar results and considered extreme romantic love, such as limerence, to be a pathological result of anxious-ambivalent attachment, as will be discussed.

Furthermore, romantic love was described neurologically as a complex ontology involving cognitive, chemical, and goal-oriented behavior (Aron, Dutton, Aron, & Iverson, 1989; Bianchi-Demicheli, Grafton, & Ortigue, 2006). More specifically, love is defined as lust, attraction, and attachment (Emanuele et al., 2006; Fisher, 1997); a dopaminergic motivation system (Esch & Stefano, 2005); and a subliminal priming (face and body recognition) involving a specific neural network that surpasses a dopaminergic motivation system (Bianchi-Demicheli et al., 2006). Romantic love is thought to have stress-reducing and health-promoting characteristics reinforcing the survival of the species (Aron et al., 2005; Esch & Stefano, 2005).

Extreme romantic love has been defined as intense, passionate love (Jankowaik & Fischer, 1992), extremities of love (E. N. Aron & Aron, 1997), such as intensely felt sensations and emotions, intrusive thoughts, and a strong desire for reciprocity or fear of rejection as in the case of limerence (Tennov, 1979). Despite Tennov's (1979) insistence that limerence is not a mental health illness it has been seen as anxious-ambivalent attachment, love addiction, mania, obsession, (Collard & O'Kelly, 2011; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Wakin & Vo, 2008) and intrusive thoughts, infatuation, and mutual confirmation of feelings (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), leaving its other more positive descriptors, such as inspiration and ecstasy (Fisher, 1997; Liebowitz, 1955; Tennov, 1979) virtually unexplored.

Limerence, born from over 800 qualitative interviews on the topic of romantic love, involves an involuntary, inescapable, joyous, overwhelming, obsessive state of mind caused by romantic and sexual attraction to another person with validation of feelings from that person (Tennov, 1979). Tennov reported the course of limerence as a 6-step pattern of behavior (detailed in the limerence analysis section).

Another influential theoretical perspective, humanistic psychology, may offer a more comprehensive view potentially aligning with Maslow's (1954) *peak experiences*, such as euphoria and ecstasy. Using Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs the motivation of a person exhibiting limerence can be described as stagnation at the level of need for love and social belonging (Rogers, 1951; Tennov, 1979). The Grof and Grof (1989) model of spiritual emergency allows limerence to be viewed as a nonordinary state of consciousness, and as such to be considered within the context of a range of transformative states associated with spiritual traditions; this permits analysis beyond the limitations of a pathology-oriented biopsychology model.

Grof and Grof (1989) defined ten spiritual emergency subcategories, of which two are especially relevant to limerence. The first of their subcategories is *kundalini awakening* from the Hindu yogic literature, usually described as a physical heat or energetic sensation along the base to the top of the spine; it includes involuntary and uncontrollable behaviors such as shaking, spasms, twisting movements, and temporary moments of intense emotions, such as anxiety, anger, sadness, joy, and euphoric bliss. Some parallel may exist between limerence and the characteristics of a kundalini awakening, evidenced by the emotional range and intensity in the location of the chest described by most limerence participants:

I found surprisingly consistent support for the ancient wisdom that associates love with the heart. When I asked interviewees in the throes of the limerent condition to tell where they felt the sensation of limerence, they pointed unerringly to the midpoint in their chest. (Tennov, 1979, p. 64)

A second relevant subcategory is *psychic opening*, described as an awareness of greater intuitive abilities, some with out-of-body experiences, deeper connection with others, and losing one's self in another by means of a deeper connection (Grof & Grof, 1989; Wade, 2000, 2004). The characteristic of losing one's self in another may echo the limerent aspect of idolizing or empowering the limerent object by disempowering the self (Tennov, 1979).

Extreme experiences of romantic love such as limerence (Tennov, 1979), and spiritual emergency (Grof & Grof, 1989), have both been described as enough of a change from a person's commonly experienced way of functioning that they may reasonably be considered altered states of consciousness. According to Tart (1976), any *discrete state of consciousness* may be defined as:

A unique configuration or system of psychological structures or subsystems. The structures or subsystems show some quantitative and minor qualitative variation in the way in which they process information or cope or have experiences but the structures or subsystems and their energetic pattern of interactions comprise a "system." The operations of the components, the psychological structures, interact with each other and stabilize each other's functioning by means of feedback control such that the system, the discrete state of consciousness, maintains its overall patterning of functioning within a varying environment. (p. 53)

An altered state of consciousness is a discrete state that differs from the baseline state, especially a baseline accepted as normal, waking, adult consciousness characterized by clinically and culturally-sanctioned dimensions of time, space, and agency (Wade, 1996). An example of a discrete state of altered consciousness is a daydream. Romantic love is often depicted in moments of fantasizing or daydreaming of the beloved, possibly an altered state in itself. Specifically, in limerence nonverbal awareness increases to a heightened sustained state in which excessive concern over trivial things often emerges and may appear as obsession and paranoia (Tennov, 1979).

Furthermore, according to Wade (1996),

Consciousness concerns the intersection between private, "interior," "subjective" experience and the "objective" or "outside" world. Views of consciousness as a mediating dynamic between subjective experience and an outside environment rely on an interior modeling of the outside world held in memory. Memory is an integral part of conscious experience, binding

the moment-to-moment sense of awareness into a coherent pattern that provides the sense of personal continuity, the ongoing sense of self. (pp. 4–5)

A limerent respondent's disclosure illustrates the shift in his normal organization of consciousness and the struggle rationalizing his interior model of reality and what he knows to be objectively true:

How can I continue to feel so strongly when it seems apparent by objective standards, by the standards I would apply to anyone else, that her work is mediocre? But as soon as I say that, my head fills with objections to the idea. I make excuses—she has had an inadequate background, and the potential is there. I take anything that is less than terrible and blow it up into something of genius. But part of me knows that this glowing image is my own construction. (Tennov, 1979, p. 21)

Therefore, altered states of consciousness motivated by extreme romantic love are seen as significant: (a) biological changes in physiology, such as increased brain activity (Fisher, Brown, Aron, Strong, & Mashek, 2010; Xu et al., 2012); (b) phenomenological shifts in a range of sensations, such as merging with the beloved—also known as a state of "oneness" (Wade, 2000); for example, a research participant described his experience as:

Any sense of separateness between us dissolved. I couldn't even tell whether I was making love to her or being made love to. I can hardly even tell you what our physical bodies were doing because it was like our bodies were part of the flow and ebb of all this energy and Spirit body. We were all mixed together in this mysterious, melting dance. Body awareness merged with all the other levels . . . We were one moving, touching mass of energy and awareness, not two separate poles of consciousness . . . I sort of felt like a woman and a man . . . where all we were was one being, one love, kind of a melting together. (Wade, 2000, p. 108)

Altered states inspired by extreme romantic love are also (c) a range of emotions from fear to euphoria:

“It appears that although the direction of feeling—happy vs. unhappy—shifts rapidly, the intensity of limerence, measured through intensive reverie, alters less rapidly, and alters only in response to an accumulation of experiences with the particular LO [limerent object (beloved)]” (Tennov, 1979, p. 42); and (d) abrupt changes in behavior and cognition, such as isolation (Tennov, 1979) and converting from a lifelong religion to a new one, solely for the beloved (Aron & Aron, 1997).

Building on this more positive approach to transformations, psychic openings, and altered states, this research focused on positive opportunities of extreme romantic love, allowing those who have lived it to speak to its essence, drawing from their own immersion in the experience. Since most people seeking a romantic relationship will experience falling in love, and a few will have extreme experiences, understanding the positive transformational potential is a crucial contribution to understanding this intense phenomenon as a whole.

Method

The current self-report, phenomenological, exploratory design was chosen for its focus on the detailed experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007) and to contrast the extreme experience with other forms of being in love, such as limerence (Tennov, 1979), and other extreme phenomenon, such as spiritual emergency (Grof & Grof, 1989), and discrete altered states of consciousness (Tart, 1976).

Participants

The sample comprised 25 English-speaking U.S.-born adults, age 30 or older for maturity, without a self-reported history of mental health or substance abuse problems, who reported at least one intense romantic love experience considered extraordinary and the value of that experience was significant or life-changing. The demographics of the sample were 16 females (64%) and nine males (36%). Nineteen (76%; 12 females, 7 males) were in a committed relationship, such as married, domestic partners, and monogamous. Most of the sample were Caucasians (21, 84%), in their 30s (10, 40%) and 40s (8, 32%), considered themselves spiritual,

not religious (10, 40%) or Christian (8, 32%). Most participants (20, 80%) had attended some college or more, and lived in Western states (10, 40%), primarily California (8, 32%). Candidates were recruited by advertising with online publications and community billboards in the United States. The secure online study website screened candidates for eligibility (listed above). Those who qualified were then asked demographic information and provided a consent form to electronically sign and register as a participant in the study.

Procedures

Interviews were confidential, one-on-one, and open-ended designed to last 45–60 minutes. The interviews were conducted via computer video conferencing software or telephone. A 5–10 minute relaxation meditation exercise was administered at the beginning of each interview in order to provide a safe and comfortable environment for the participant. The semi-structured interview consisted of 12 open-ended questions regarding the participant’s extreme occurrence of falling in love. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed into text and underwent thematic analysis, including looking for trends by significant demographic groups. Transpersonal qualitative research focuses on the integration of several characteristics of human experience, such as body, emotion, intellect, spirituality, community, and creativity (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Finally, the rich text descriptions were compared to caregiver attachment, limerence, altered states of consciousness, and spiritual emergency, to arrive at the essence of this extreme love phenomenon.

Findings

The extreme occurrence of falling in love follows a similar timeline to a romantic love relationship in that the experience begins with a meeting stage, then either a commitment stage or break up ensues after a varied amount of time. Introductions were often high-impact events, vividly remembered even though they occurred some time ago. The events recalled had occurred within a large range of time from 6 months to 31 years prior to the interviews with an average of 10 years. Meeting conditions were *open to a relationship but not actively searching*

for one (12, 48%; 6F, 6M); *actively seeking a serious romantic relationship* (9, 36%; 8F, 1M); and *neither interested in, nor searching for, a significant romantic love relationship* (4, 16%; 2F, 2M) when their extreme love connection began. This information surfaced during the interview indirectly.

Participants' meetings ranged from social environments (13, 52%; 9F, 4M), such as community festivals, house parties, school dormitory rooms, and bowling leagues; to work environments (6, 24%; 4F, 2M), such as at the office, professional association meetings, and on volunteer assignments; to online environments (6, 24%; 6F, 6M), such as dating websites, chat rooms, and special interest forums.

The meeting stage was characterized by all participants as extraordinary in some way, and described as shocking, intense, electric, and synchronistic. Significant themes were *dynamic connection, intense emotions, and new behavior*.

Dynamic Connection

The vast majority of the sample (22, 88%; 13F, 9M) reported a vibrant bonding experience. Mostly men (8, 36%; 1F, 7M) expressed connecting on *many different levels, authentically* by creating safety and not feeling the need to protect themselves but rather to open and deeply share themselves. Michael said, "This was a person I fell in love with, not someone I felt needed to be fixed. I fell in love with the person that she is, not for what I wanted her to be." And Jennifer reported, "It scared me how honest I was with him, how easy it was to be myself, how I never had to lie or pretend to be something or someone I wasn't."

For some (6, 24%; 3F, 3M) this deep bonding arose *quickly, almost immediately* at the beginning of the experience, and often it was quite unexpected. For example, Susan, a 42-year-old, White woman who was looking for a relationship happened to attend a dinner party at a friend's house when she met her extreme beloved. They connected enough to go out together, and she reported, "When we went on our first date, I remember not wanting it to end. I instantly fell in love!" Kevin, a middle-aged homosexual in an open relationship, was looking for a casual hookup online, but when he met his date in person he said, "It was love at first sight, basically...it seemed

like it was the way it hit me and evolved. It was surprising and shocking it happened that way."

Participants spoke of the *powerful force* (6, 24%; 4F, 2M) of the connection as sensations of bonding with their beloved, so strongly that nothing else mattered. Jessie, a heterosexual, White woman in her early thirties, who met her extreme beloved at an outdoor music concert, said, "I could actually feel the world around me didn't matter....Nothing happened that was not happening in that moment, it was absolutely the most intense thing!" Mark, a middle aged, heterosexual, White man, who met his extreme beloved while stationed with the military 27 years earlier, articulated his understanding of the powerful force of the connection as, "tunnel vision... [to] spend every moment available with them." And after almost three decades of separation when Mark and his extreme beloved were reunited the bond was still strong, he stated, "It was like time stood still."

Several interviewees (5, 20%; 3F, 2M) reported a feeling of *immediate knowing or recognition* when meeting their beloved, despite, for the majority, never having known them before. Michelle, a 47-year-old, heterosexual, Mixed-race woman, who met her extreme beloved two years ago at her place of employment, stated, "The feeling was extreme, I have never felt before. It was a very strong connection. It was like he was me, but the male form." According to Robert, a 30-year-old, heterosexual, White man, who met his extreme beloved at a college party four years ago, "I really felt like the second I met her, we knew each other... since the day I was born."

Certain contributors (5, 20%; 3F, 2M) described these connection experiences as *electric and energetic* physical sensations all over their body. Matthew stated, "The difference was how it felt. Meeting this person there was an immediate spark; it was a feeling like a lightning bolt." Jessie reported, "I felt butterflies...I noticed my breath was rather shallow, breathing was crazy like that, and when we kissed I felt it. Electricity is the only way I can describe it. And he would comment on it the same way. It was really extraordinary. He said the word "electricity" first, and then we both agreed. That's the best way to describe it." And Lisa shared, "This man walked in the door one day, like in those movies.

I looked at him, and he looked back at me. It was an electrical connection. I couldn't stop staring at him, and he couldn't stop staring at me. It was crazy, crazy...I have never experienced that in my life."

Intense Emotions

The majority (21, 84%; 12F, 9M) of participants reported powerful and intense feelings during the beginning of the experience. Intense emotions were usually a blend of *positive excitement* (12, 57%; 7F, 5M) combined with *fulfillment* (9, 43%; 5F, 4M) above and beyond what participants had felt before in other relationships, marking this experience as unique and significant. Examples of the *positive excitement* subtheme are: Robert said, "I felt good... like I was on top of the world, very positive and happy." Kevin shared, "Looking at him, it was that idea of looking at someone's soul...butterflies and weak in the knees, this total corruption of your body. You feel elated, euphoric, like you're taking a drug." Susan responded with, "He is perfect for me, he is so different from other men I have dated. I felt safe and loved! I would get butterflies when I saw him, and it still happens to this day! I felt excited and then I would feel secure." And Heather stated, "I do remember that just literally being happier and kind of immersed in the experience and really enjoying it."

Examples of the *fulfillment* subtheme are illustrated by the following testimonials: Brian said, "I felt very balanced, like everything just fell into place." Samantha reported, "Emotions were...have you ever been so stimulated by someone's conversation that it turns into an all encompassing thing, like you almost made love, complete experience, everything was fed, your mind, soul, and body?" And Matthew stated, "My feelings were very sure. I had no doubt about being with him. I had never felt that way about anyone outside my family before. But I knew he was now part of me and part of my family."

State of Mind

Two-thirds (15, 60%; 10F, 5M) of participants' state of mind were in *astonishment* when meeting their extreme beloved, which somehow shocked them out of their complacency or normal state of mind into a different way of perceiving and relating, leading them to positively pursue the relationship, despite their previous thought patterns and beliefs. Michael, who met his extreme beloved while volunteering for a

disaster cleanup organization out of state, described being astonished by her after they kissed for the first time. What he called a "warm weakness"—weak knees, and heightened senses of smell and taste, her becoming the center of his focus—was exacerbated by her departure the next morning. Lisa, who met her extreme beloved on the job, described her moment of astonishment as a scene from a classic love story, "The facility [where she worked] was an old mansion. [It] had a balcony like in the movie *Gone with the Wind*. Imagine me standing on that balcony and he coming up the stairs...I remember thinking, 'Wow, that guy is hot [laughter].'" Christy, who met her extreme lover at a bowling alley, was so taken by him that she disregarded her morals, which normally would have forbade her from dating a drug dealer, to be with the man who attracted her so strongly: "I was madly in love with him He was a bad boy and that excited me."

Almost one-third (7, 28%; 5F, 2M) were *confused* at the moment they met their extreme beloved, which led them to pursue the relationship with an uncertain state-of-mind. Jessie, who was not wanting nor searching for a romantic relationship, stated:

I'm a thinker before I'm a doer and this was making me be a doer before a thinker. I was actually being led by my heart and not my mind at this point. That was new territory. I was very overwhelmed. [I had] very clouded thinking. [I was] very confused. This new way of feeling was awesome, but I couldn't come up with a logical reason why it was happening (laughter).

Jennifer, who, after being enamored by her extreme beloved upon meeting, allowed her friends to talk her out of pursuing him, ended the relationship. After only a few weeks did she realize how much she missed him, and she reconnected with him; they are married today. Brian, who was searching for a romantic partner at the time he met his extreme lover, described extremely positive moments of love mixed with sharp contrasting negative moments. He said,

There were a couple of things that were disturbing...like his [extreme beloved's]

aggressive outbursts of rage over little things. Once, we were out in a restaurant at dinner, and I accidentally stepped on his foot. He yelled at me to move my foot; it was embarrassing.

New Behavior

Within seconds of meeting each other, roughly one-third of respondents (8, 32%; 5F, 3M) reported a motivation to perform *atypical* behaviors, which were often implemented immediately during the first moments of meeting their extreme beloved. New *assertive* behaviors (5, 20%; 2F, 3M) included breaking through social barriers, such as shyness, to effect the first meeting. Maria, a 30-year-old, bisexual, Hispanic woman, who knew her extreme beloved as a child and after many years met him in a local night club, stated, "I don't go out of my way, and I did with him. I'm usually shy, and I almost did that, and that voice inside said, 'No you have to say hi.'" Robert was surprised by how assertively he behaved: "I sometimes get hesitant approaching new people. I prefer my friends to introduce me; it's a lot more comforting. I was by myself when I approached her. So it was different, and I'm glad I did that." For some women (3F, 12%) new behaviors involved making a *compromise*, necessary for the relationship to begin and sometimes necessary for it to continue. Compromise was defined as going against their beliefs and morals to please their beloved. Michelle, who fell in love with her extreme partner but he did not, discussed compromising her equality in the relationship, such as agreeing to an open relationship when she wanted monogamy: "He brought a lot out of me that I normally would not have allowed." Janet, who met her extreme beloved at work, and was fired due to the relationship, stated, "I engaged in the relationship despite all the rules and ethical boundaries [in the workplace]."

Commitment Stage

Participants' testimonials naturally divided into two groups. There were: (a) those who *continued* into a committed relationship or did not follow such a smooth path, but involved some form of discontinuous connection; or (b) those couples who *broke up*.

Continued Relationships. Two-thirds (17, 68%; 11F, 6M) of the participants continued into

a significant, romantic, relationship comprised of a *committed, significant relationship* (8, 50%; 4F, 4M; not legal marriage or domestic partnership); *legally married* (6F, 37%); and a *connection with intermittent commitment* (3, 19%; 1F, 2M). Mark, a White man in his early fifties, who for the last twenty-three years has agonized over not receiving closure from his extreme love experience, discussed how he never stopped thinking about her, despite marrying and having a family with another woman. He finally contacted his extreme beloved, and they found the dynamic bond still intact, so much so that they left their spouses to be together. According to Mark:

Six years ago, I had always thought of her during travels, I looked at phone books to see if I could find her and used the technology and tracked her down. She was married. I was also married at the time, but it was at a point where we hadn't had closure and I was really wanting to let her know I felt bad about that. I didn't hear anything from her for six months and then got a response. We didn't ask addresses or location but we just touched base: doing great, couple of kids, everything is great. In my mind it was not what I thought, and I had always wished for another chance at crossing paths [with her].

Four years ago, I received a response from her, that she was going to be in my general area and wanted to know if we could see each other. I think we were both looking for closure. Even though we thought about each other over the years, we had gone off in different directions. I guess, really, it was hard to move on. What were we doing with this lingering in the past. So, I did meet her and it was almost...as if no time had passed. It has almost been 27 years!

Broke Up. Participants who did not continue into a significant relationship and *broke up* (8, 32%; 5F, 3M) described a struggle to agree on the terms of their relationship, such as nonexclusivity. Of the people who broke up, most (5, 62%) were younger, in their twenties (3, 37%) and thirties (2, 25%) when they met their extreme beloved. Half (4, 44%; 3F, 1M) of participants who broke up reported feeling a strong bond that was not reciprocated by their

extreme beloved. *One-sided bonding* examples include Elizabeth, a White woman in her mid-thirties, who met her extreme beloved at work, indicated that he was also in another relationship, stating: "He told me although he has been sleeping with me for almost two years he is thinking of proposing to his girlfriend."

General Themes

Aside from the progress of their relationships, participant reflections revealed other qualities that had led them to characterize these particular relationships as extreme love experiences. Several general themes emerged.

Impact. Participants were asked to describe the impact the relationship had on them in terms of how their lives were affected. A clear majority (20, 80%; 15F, 5M) of participants reported a *positive* impact. Participants described a positive mindset and outlook on life since experiencing the extreme occurrence of falling in love. The majority of these (17, 85%; 12F, 5M) also continued to a significant relationship. Dolly said,

Positive, definitely. I think it's helped me be a more well-rounded person. Seeing things differently, like in a family perspective. I want to have children; I want to raise children. I care more deeply. We have a future we are planning, and a past we look back at happily. This has been, and is, one of the greatest things ever. I couldn't be happier about it.

Amanda stated, "It made me look at my life plans differently and reconsider my goals. [To] take happiness more seriously than earning a living or worrying about peer acceptance." Matthew shared, "Everything is really positive. Even when a disagreement may seem negative, working it out and communicating feelings will usually result in a deeper understanding and a positive outcome." Michelle indicated, "Definitely positive...because it really heightened life for me; it showed me that there's always greater." Jennifer voiced, "To this day I love being with him, next to him, near him. I have told him the darkest parts of me, and he still holds me." And, Mark proclaimed,

It's been positive. Even if there's something we cannot get past. Even then, it has been a beautiful

experience; I don't want it to end. Like I've always told her, "I want her to be happy." But, I didn't expect her happiness to be at the expense of mine [as in past relationships]. I didn't want it to end; it gets better and better.

A large grouping (14; 56%, 8F, 6M) of contributors identified a personal benefit from the experience. Michelle responded, "I felt like I have a lot more patience; I see that ability expand to treating myself better. I learned that I'm not a burden." Mark shared,

I have proven to myself that I can change....She brought out the ability in me to communicate and move myself to the next level. If she and I no longer are together, it will give me the ability to understand, in the next relationship, what to expect, tolerate, and avoid.

Amanda said,

I learned to think out of the box. To not be afraid of change. To realize that it would all work out fine, anyway. To take a chance. To take time for myself and those I love. To play more and not to be a workaholic.

And, Matthew stated,

Learning how to communicate, learning to be open and accepting another person's ideas and thoughts. Understanding that we deserve to be loved and [to be] happy are all parts of this experience. And seeing that we don't follow a traditional mold of family but can make our own.

A portion (5, 20%; 3F, 2M) of participants whose extreme experience did not continue into a significant relationship described a mindset and emotional state including both positive and negative impacts. Examples, ranging from more positive than negative to completely negative, include from Brandy, "The experience had a lot of negative but both positive and negative. The long lasting thing was the motivation to be a good mother and provide a good life." Elizabeth shared, "Both, I am thankful for all I felt . . . but so hurt, I almost regret it all."

In the long run I've gone back to shielding myself. There are more negatives than positives

and, perhaps, I'm going to grow old alone. The stronger the fire the faster it burns. It crashed and burned. It was nine unbelievably beautiful months. (Eric)

And, Jessie stated, "I often compare my current relationship to that one; there's not the electricity like before....I'm left with a feeling of lacking."

Extraordinary Nature of the Extreme Love Connection. In addition to the extraordinary qualities mentioned as part of the progress of the relationship, other characteristics clearly set these particular relationships apart from all others in the individuals' experience. Primary themes were a soul-mate connection; the presence of altered states of awareness interacting with the beloved; and general uniqueness of experience.

The *soul-mate* experience (18, 72%; 11F, 7M), comprised two aspects, *paranormal connection* (8, 44%; 6F, 2M) and *spiritual intimacy* (7, 39%; 3F, 4M). Participants reported paranormal connection as a psychic connection, such as communicating without speaking, seeing, or physically being with each other. Lisa said, "We were very attuned, on the same page, very psychically connected, like if there was something wrong with him and I wasn't in the room, I would know." Michael elaborated, "The term soul-mate; very few people could realize exactly how intense that it can be when two people are so much in tune that they almost can feel how the other is feeling." Christy exclaimed, "Clairvoyant! I knew what he was doing [when thinking of him] We could finish each other's sentences." And, Kevin reported, "We were so well connected that it's sort of eerie." Spiritual intimacy was defined as a refined, deep, mystical closeness, a soul kinship: Joe said, "I think that if there is such a thing, one person who completes you, a soul-mate, a person who you could see yourself with for the rest of your life, then this was it." Michelle detailed,

Spiritual, we have the same beliefs and likes . . . it's like he's me but in male form. He was partly a teacher and helped me grow as a person. He taught me that I'm important, too. He's told me that I bring him to life, and when he's with me I'm alive!

And, James said, "Our connection was very easy. I felt an inspiration that we could be spiritually intimate; we challenged each other to be honest and real. I was turned on to be that person who supports and helps her."

In contrast to the soul-mate connection, a few (4, 16%; 3F, 1M) participants described their extreme lover connection with practical, logical terminology without any mystical or spiritual language. Susan simply called her beloved, "My partner in life," and Robert said, "It's a great feeling. We know that we're at ease with each other."

Because some authors directly identify altered states in certain intense love relationships, such as merging with the beloved or a state of oneness in transcendent sex (Wade, 2000, 2004), and others may imply the presence of altered states in certain extreme relationships, such as rapidly shifting intense emotions in limerence (Tennov, 1979), participants were asked both generally and specifically about altered states of consciousness, such as *what was happening with your senses in terms of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching and during the experience did you notice a change in your awareness, like losing track of time*, respectively.

Altered states were defined as a change of multi-sensory awareness from the clinical markers of time, space, and agency considered normal for adults in Western cultures, when they were with their extreme beloved. About two-thirds of the sample (17, 68%; 11F, 6M) reported an *altered state of consciousness*. Most involved the plasticity of temporal awareness. For example, Brandy said, "Oh, yeah, that [loss of time] happened very frequently. I could spend the whole day with him doing nothing. I was happy just being with him." Kevin reported distortions of time and self-boundaries with his beloved:

Yeah, definitely a loss of time awareness; things slowed down. Wanting to be with him more. I didn't track time like I would normally. I was trained as a pilot to be time-oriented, and I was not [when this happened].

Sex was another time I could lose time I wanted to be in bed all day long. Yes, altered states like tantric [sex], getting into a rhythm and get so

connected looking into his eyes. [It was] almost a loss of self where you meld into each other.

Others reported states of narrowed focus combined with other nonordinary changes in perception: Eric exclaimed,

Oh God yeah, there were times we were late and running out of time, often. You don't even notice the rest of the world; you have your own piece of world. I am surprised the government hasn't made it illegal. If they could bottle it, I would rob the 7-Eleven to get it. How good it makes you feel, pulse rate slows, breathing slows and my mind was not going through tasks.

Samantha said, "Yes, oh, yes, especially when we talked in the middle of the night and into the early morning. We would sit outside in the cold, long, long walks and not notice. That's magical when you have that." And, Elizabeth shared, "Being with him made me feel like nothing else mattered. It's like...yoga, time slows and we [extreme beloved] are just together, nothing else exists."

For these and other reasons, one-quarter of the participants ranked the experience extreme due to its overall *uniqueness* (6, 24%; 4F, 2M). Participants described their extreme love occurrence as a one-of-a-kind experience.

James stated, "I have feelings I've never felt before . . . I wanted this woman to have my baby. I've never felt that way before. I want to be monogamous." Samantha stated,

It was one of a kind. It was very real, that love, especially while we were together. Sometimes he would say, "I don't want a romantic relationship with you." I told him that I love you beyond that kind of obvious thing, you know.

Dolly said,

I feel like it's true love. The others felt kind of close, but they weren't right, true, deep and profound. It's a precious bubble with all my emotions. Also, I'm okay if it doesn't work out, that's different—it isn't meant to be, that's okay.

Value of Extreme Love Relationships.

Participants discussed the value of extreme love relationships compared to more common love experiences. When asked whether they had experienced another life event with the same value, roughly two-thirds (16, 64%; 10F, 6M) of participants were not able to equate another life experience with their extreme occurrence of falling in love. Most said no without elaboration. Eric stated, "Nothing, not really. That experience would stand alone." Heather explained, "This [extreme love experience] is such an enormous one, that has been with me for so long . . . This is absolutely number one and gets a 100, and nothing else gets over a 50!"

Talking About the Extreme Love Experience.

A key theme was whether the participant kept the extreme occurrence of falling in love a secret or told others. Over half (14, 56%; 10F, 4M) of the interviewees had shared their extreme experience with others, such as family, friends, and therapists. Of the balance (11, 44%; 6F, 5M) who did not, some spoke generally of not sharing intimate information with others and a concern for what others might think.

In summary, the general themes provided effects and perspectives of the extreme occurrence in addition to the timeline framework. Overall, participants reported a positive impact, such as a change in mindset and outlook on life, from experiencing the extreme occurrence, whether it resulted in a significant relationship or not. The extraordinary nature of the relationship derived from what was perceived to be a soul-mate connection and the presence of altered-state phenomena. Furthermore, most of the participants did not equate the extreme experience with another life experience: It stood out as a unique, coveted and rare experience, which the majority shared with family and friends. In fact, talking about it again during the study interview was appreciated as a valuable experience itself.

Limerence Analysis

In addition to a thematic analysis arising from the data to describe the extreme love experience, a separate comparative analysis was employed to

examine the extreme occurrence statements for their relationship with limerence characteristics. Because a key area of interest for this study was whether limerence could be equated with extreme experiences of falling in love, all instances of similarity are reported, regardless of whether they reach levels of qualitative significance. Limerence was defined as an *involuntary, inescapable, joyous, obsessive state-of-mind with intrusive thoughts* caused by romantic and sexual attraction to another, heightened to the *idealization of their beloved*, involving a need for validation of feelings from their beloved due to a *fear of rejection* and considered *unrequited love* (Tennov, 1979). The joyous descriptor was not considered an indistinguishable characteristic of limerence, and therefore was removed from the analysis.

The remaining seven characteristics were then analyzed and sorted by most impactful. Findings of the distinguishable limerence characteristics appeared with the following frequency counts in the records of extreme love experiences. Women were much more likely than men to show evidence of limerence qualities:

1. Idealized beloved (6, 24%; 4F, 2M) was defined by Tennov (1979) as venerating the beloved. Example statements from this study included Amanda's statement: "Nothing else seemed as important as I'd thought it was before, in comparison, not my job, my family, my previous plans, nothing. He became the most important thing in my life."

2. Unrequited love (6, 24%; 5F, 1M) was defined as experiencing barriers to being together and challenges to securing a trusting bond (Tennov, 1979). Examples in this study included those who reported infidelity and dishonesty as obstacles. Michelle stated, "I can't let go of him and he's married." Samantha, who recently lost her extreme beloved, said "I fell in love with Tom. I can't say he fell in love with me."

3. Inescapable (2F, 8%), defined by Tennov (1979) as an unavoidable state of mind, refers to the compulsive mental fantasy in limerence, usually regarding reciprocation from the beloved. Janet described her fantasy of impressing her beloved, "I wanted his VIP approval. I found myself wanting to impress him."

4. Intrusive thoughts (2F, 8%) was understood as mental preoccupation, "a condition of cognitive obsession" (Tennov, 1979, p. 33), inspired by the love object. Janet said: "My thoughts went to him. Toward the end, I did feel out of control."

5. Fear of rejection (2F, 8%) were feelings of heightened anxiety that the limerent object would not reciprocate and would reject them, some with physiological indicators, such as heart palpitations, trembling, and general weakness (Tennov, 1979). Heather, who began her extreme lover experience communicating via audio cassette tapes, said, "I was very insecure about my physical desirability and, somewhat insecure about my personality." However, her fears subsided once she met her extreme beloved in person and received validation of her attractiveness.

6. Obsessive thoughts (1F, 4%) was defined as an uncontrollable thought process where all events, associations, and stimuli return one's thoughts to the limerent object (Tennov, 1979). According to Lisa, who was awestruck with her extreme beloved upon first sight, "I couldn't stop thinking about him." Lisa's extreme beloved, a chef at her place of employment, persistently pursued her by making gourmet meals and special little desserts only for her. Dissimilar to the uncertainty in limerence, Lisa had no doubt in her mind her extreme beloved wanted her.

7. Involuntary was defined as an unintentional thought process focused almost entirely on the fantasy of reciprocation from the limerent object (Tennov, 1979). Only Janet reported this mental compulsion of fantasizing about reciprocity from the executive she fell in love with at work.

The information above is summarized in Table 1 by respondent name, showing that the same small number of individuals account for the match between Tennov's (1979) limerence characteristics and extreme love experiences, with only Janet exhibiting 6 out of the 7 (85%) characteristics of limerence.

Twelve (48%) participants produced records lacking any matching limerence characteristics. Furthermore, the comparative analysis yielded participant statements which negated limerence characteristics. The results showed 7 (28%; 3F, 4M) participants specifically contradicted distinguishable limerence features, such as reports of mutual,

Characteristics	Percentage of sample	Number of participants	Participant names
Idealized love	24%	6	Janet, Brandy, Josie, Amanda, Brian, Eric
Unrequited love	24%	6	Janet, Heather, Mark, Michelle, Samantha, Elizabeth
Inescapable	8%	2	Janet, Lisa
Intrusive thoughts	8%	2	Janet, Brandy
Fear of rejection	8%	2	Janet, Heather
Obsessive thoughts	4%	1	Lisa
Involuntary	4%	1	Janet

Table 1. Frequency of Limerence Characteristics within Sample

reciprocal love, safety and trusting. Reciprocal love (4, 57%; 1F, 3M) examples include James's report, as previously stated, of meeting his beloved while still married to his wife and yet feeling intense and powerful emotions that were reciprocated by his extreme beloved. Matthew said, "Meeting this person there was an immediate 'spark' . . . I felt more drawn to and connected to him. And he was also very clear that he felt the same way." Examples of safety and trusting (3, 43%; 2F, 1M) are: Eric stated, "I think that I was used to shielding and that was no longer necessary. I could let my guard down. I wasn't afraid I would get hurt." And Mark shared, "It was our comfort level with each other . . . we both said, more comfortable than our spouses, everything."

The final analysis consisted of comparing the course of limerence and the course for the extreme occurrence of falling in love. The course of limerence has five steps. It begins with a look by a physically attractive beloved, a lightening-bolt experience (Tennov, 1979), which correlates with the electric spark reported in the dynamic connection theme (5, 20%; 3F, 2M). An example is Jessie's statement, "What made it different was . . . the electricity."

The second step was described as thoughts of the beloved that were pleasurable, often euphoric, with a sense of buoyancy and freedom (Tennov, 1979). Most participants' testimonials (21, 84%;

12F, 9M) had a strong correlation to this step, with Heather using the same descriptors, "Being more buoyant in life, feeling . . . more positive about things, being more excited because I had this thing [extreme love] to look forward to."

Step 3, extreme pleasure in receiving reciprocity from the beloved resulting in a boost in self-esteem (Tennov, 1979), appeared to exist with less intensity in the extreme occurrence due to the majority of participants (22, 88%; 13F, 9M) having quickly created a mutual bond with their beloved, and not being suspended in fear and doubt as in this stage of limerence. Indeed, participants spoke of a more authentic, open reciprocity with regard to personal growth, such as, Brandy's saying, "It made me develop an inner strength I didn't realize. I had a new reason to live." Amanda is crediting her relationship with developing a new perspective on life, such as reconsidering her goals and prioritizing happiness above material items and peer approval.

Step 4 has two paths: One consists of an increase in intensity due to obstacles to overcome, including improving one's physical appearance and becoming insecure and fearful of rejection, whereas the other path consists of a decrease in intensity due to doubt of reciprocity or perceiving the beloved as unattractive (Tennov, 1979). The majority of participants' testimonials matched neither limerence path due to the secure mutual

bond that was quickly created in the meeting stage of the extreme occurrence.

The last step is described as uncertainty combined with hope, resulting in idealizing the beloved's positive qualities and emotionally overlooking their negative qualities (Tennov, 1979). This step was almost nonexistent, most participants (21, 84%; 13F, 8M) were clear that their beloved had positive and negative qualities.

In conclusion, the extreme occurrence of falling in love aspects did not correlate well with the defining characteristics of limerence, intrusive and obsessive thinking about the beloved, and the course of limerence only showed strong similarity to the extreme occurrence of falling in love in steps 1 and 2.

Spiritual Emergency Analysis

A second, similar comparative analysis was conducted utilizing the spiritual emergency literature, despite the fact that the spiritual emergency literature is predicated on individual rather than mutual or coupled experiences and that it often has psychotic features. Spiritual emergency, seen as a nonordinary process and altered states of consciousness motivated by extreme experiences was examined in the romantic love context due to the shared transpersonal potential with extreme love, such as limerence. The relevant spiritual emergency concepts analyzed for extreme love experiences were *kundalini awakening* and *psychic opening*.

Kundalini awakening analysis showed the strongest correlation between participant testimonials and the physiological-energetic aspects of emotional intensity associated with kundalini experience (21, 84%; 12F, 9M), but without direct reference to energy along the central meridians of the spine. Examples are Kevin, who previously reported intense emotions, such as elation and euphoria similar to a drug. Lisa exclaimed, "Every time I walked into the room it was like, I almost felt like passing out. I couldn't talk, I was stuck. I would forget what I was saying, I was stammering my speech. Oh God, it was crazy!" And Jessie reported, "It was kind of like when you get angry and feel your face heat up except it was positive."

The psychic opening analysis yielded some

connections between spiritual emergency psychic opening characteristics and extreme occurrences' qualities, but not all of them. Intuitive abilities were reported by six participants (24%; 4F, 2M): Lisa said,

We were very psychically connected. Like when 9/11 happened, he knew something was wrong, but he didn't know that I didn't go to work, and he rushed home first before going to my job [to find me]. He said, "I knew you were here [home]." I used to go to eat breakfast at the top floor at Windows of the World because his friend was a prep cook there, and he knew I would definitely be dead if I went there.

Maria stated,

My husband and I have a strong mental connection, this unexplained bond that goes beyond the physical. For instance, a lot of times he's thinking of the same topics I'm thinking . . . He was in his head singing this song he had just heard, and we were sitting together in complete silence, and out of nowhere I started humming some random beat and he . . . said, "Did you just sing that out loud?" and I said, "What? I was just singing something that just popped into my mind." Things like that happen to us all the time.

Eight records (32%; 1F, 7M) matched the deeper-connection-with-other aspects. Examples are:

It was almost like if you believe in being reincarnated . . . we in some point in our lives knew each other very well in a different time period . . . I'm not saying I believe in that, I don't know . . . but it was very surreal how well we were connected and how very much alike. We were alike in our viewpoints, morals, our attitudes toward others. Even though I only knew him a couple of weeks at that point, I felt like I'd known him for years . . . it felt like it was my other half was in the same room. (Jessie)

Janet stated, "We are exactly the same, like in sense of humor, same brain or soul-mate . . . two very similar people."

Excerpts (13, 52%; 9F, 4M) depicting the losing-one's-self-in-another aspect mirrored the extreme occurrence's *altered states of consciousness* general theme, both for loss of spatial and self boundaries and narrowing of sensory awareness generally to the beloved. Eric, who still feels an altered state when with his extreme beloved after 20 years of being without her, reported a slowing of pulse rate, breathing and thoughts. Brandy described doing nothing all day, happily, as long as she was with her extreme beloved. "When it was really intense you'd lose track of your environment, you were so focused on each other. One time, early on, we kissed and I knew right then . . . there was something magical about us being together," said Brian. "I was in my own world and that's all that mattered. It felt like it was just us in the world and that's it," stated Jessie.

Spiritual emergency theory states that people who successfully transition through the extreme experience often report an impact that was both significant and valuable with important life lessons (Grof & Grof, 1989). As noted, ranking their experience as extreme was a screening requirement for the study, and other questions in the interview process tested the valence of the love experience with the result that 16 (64%; 10F, 6M) said the extreme occurrence was an unparalleled event in their lives. A majority (20, 80%; 15F, 5M) experienced a positive impact, suggesting that, if an extreme love experience can be equated with a spiritual emergency, it is one that may be successfully transited, per the self-improvement reported in participant testimonials.

In summary, the extreme occurrence of falling in love phenomenon was closely correlated with certain aspects of spiritual emergency, most notably certain features of kundalini awakening and psychic opening. Participants reported a positive impact similar to the successful resolution of the spiritual emergency process.

Conclusion

This research study was primarily exploratory in nature, and it began by questioning whether positive examples of extreme love (in contrast to limerence) existed, and if so, what they were like. In fact, the results suggest that a unique phenomenon

has been discovered, one that, now having been identified, may be easier to explore in future research. The extreme occurrence of falling in love has both similar and unique aspects of romantic love, such as passionate love and quick, secure bonding, respectively. A common U.S. belief in "the one" or soul-mate, mate selection, secure attachment, and committed lifelong relationships appear to frame this experience as romantic love.

The extreme occurrence of falling in love stands closely related to romantic love and limerence, yet is sufficiently different to warrant a distinctive designation. It is a unique phenomenon with intense and powerful, positive physical and emotional sensations, creating an almost immediate, familiar, effortless, and lasting nonordinary dynamic connection, often inspiring personal growth with lifepartner potential, which was reported repeatedly and congruently by participants. Just as Tenno (1979) coined limerence to describe a particular extreme love phenomenon characterized by pathology, the positive extreme love connection identified in this research deserves a designation that reflects its unique qualities. The new phenomenon is called *amigeist* and is comprised of the Latin root of love, *ami*, and the German word *geist* meaning spirit: *Love-spirit* then is a heart-centered, intimate oneness that seems to partake of a higher-level, peak-experience, or spiritual connection. The term suggests the many unique spiritually-based qualities of the extreme occurrence, such as the astonishing, rapid experience of soul-mate, dynamic bonding, including very intense emotions and sensations often with an altered state of consciousness. The six amigeist characteristics are: (a) dynamic connection; (b) astonished state of mind; (c) intense sensations; (d) soul-mate connections; (e) long-term relationship; and (f) positive impact.

Analogous to the way the phenomena of spiritual emergency shed light on "functional psychoses" (Grof & Grof, 1989, p. 4), amigeist sheds light on extreme romantic love. The integrative and holistic perspective of transpersonal psychology may provide a more comprehensive perspective to contextualize and examine extreme romantic love and allow amigeist to be seen as a personal growth opportunity. Amigeist, like transpersonal

psychology, reveals the extremes of positive human potential and experience: People can love in extraordinary ways that are neither pathological nor tragic. Amigeist offers the hope that great love is not the stuff of fables, but of real human experience, and therefore potentially available to anyone.

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