Love is Action
By Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD

Love is action, not an emotion. When I first heard this statement, I was observing a women’s psychotherapy group as a graduate school intern. These women opened their hearts to each other, allowing their pain and struggle to pour out.

One woman, Alice*, spoke about the man she lived with. As she described his inconsiderate, self-absorbed behavior, the other women were visibly restraining themselves. Alice half-heartedly defended him until she finally acknowledged that she tolerated his hurtful behavior because he loved her. How could she leave him when they loved each other so much? Finally, the group therapist looked Alice directly in the eyes and said, “Love is action, not an emotion.” It felt like a window opened in the moments of silence that followed. The statement blew like a breeze through the room, stirring Alice and the others to reconsider their relationships.

We all know that love has many faces. There is the love we have for friends. The love we share with family. And, the romantic love that we fantasize will forever keep us light on our feet. Although each kind of love is unique, they all call to us with the promise of unconditional acceptance and support.

You know that when you love someone, you want that person to be happy. In a healthy relationship, you are steadfast in this desire. Arguing, conflicts, and differences of opinion may frustrate you. But they do not turn you into an enemy. So what happens when your friend or lover decides to move away or chooses a path that takes him far from you? You might feel angry or hurt. But, in the end, you want him to be happy. You might even help him achieve the very happiness that is taking him from you. That is what love is about.

Though the love I describe might seem selfless, it is not. In order to love, you must have a self. Otherwise, who is doing the loving? If you love selflessly, you make your own thoughts and feelings subservient to your “loved ones.” You attend only to those things that are a priority to them, and you ask nothing in return. This initially seems wonderful, but you will soon find that something is very wrong. People might feel pumped up by your admiration, but what happens when they try to relate to you? Whoever stares into your soul will find only themselves looking back. Most friends and lovers want another person to connect with. Those who don’t are looking for a fan or a slave, not a mutually loving relationship. There is no way around it. A loving relationship requires two people.
If you have no self, you have nothing of yourself to offer. Not even love.

A “selfless love” can even be dangerous. This was the case with Alice. She gave herself over to someone who did not consistently care about her happiness. Although he may have cared deeply about her, he did not act lovingly toward her. Some people are like that. Their “loving” feelings are like lights that flicker in their consciousness. Their relationships develop similarly; they alternate between bright warmth and dark coldness. This is not the stuff that genuine love is made of.

Love means treating each other with respect. So, never just accept hurtful behavior from loved ones—friends, family, or lovers. Address it when it arises. Tell your loved one how what he did affected you. And do so respectfully, without any aggression and without name-calling. State how you would prefer him to act. Then listen carefully. Does he seem upset by your unhappiness? Is he genuinely willing to work with you to improve your relationship? Or, is he more interested in placating you so that you get off the topic? In the future, note whether he changes, or at least seems to be working on change. Someone who continues to hurt you is not acting out of love—even if you know he cares.

Love is more than a flickering emotion. It involves an unwavering commitment to the happiness of another. This takes work. If your relationship is marked by indifference, then the love in it is not strong or healthy. So, if you want love in your life, it is not enough to just feel it. You must work toward a cooperative, mutually respectful relationship. This is love in action.

*The names mentioned do not represent actual people.*

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