

Marriage • Parenting • Spiritual Growth • Sexuality • Relationships • Mental Health
Men • Women • Hurts and Emotions • Singles • Ministers and Mentors • Technology



a resource in:

Marriage

A Triangular Model Of Love



APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN

Counseling and Family Services

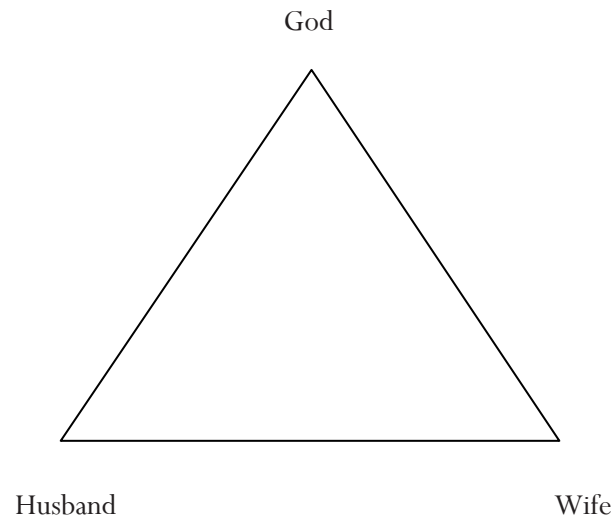
Helping the hurting. Nurturing hope. Encouraging growth.

Phone: (309) 263-5536 | www.accounseling.org

A Triangular Model of Love

How do you define love? Is it a feeling or a choice? Both? Love can be hard to describe and define because it has multiple facets and meanings. This handout shows how several aspects of love interact for the purpose of helping you better understand love in marital relationships. (*1 John 4:16*)

TRIANGLE 1: GOD – HUSBAND – WIFE

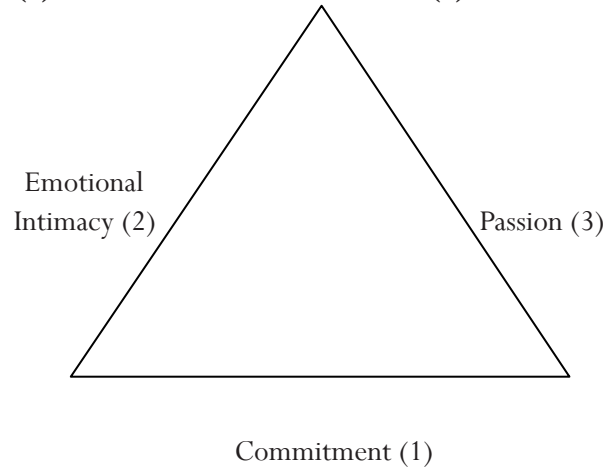


This commonly known diagram shows the relationships between a husband, wife, and God.

1. Each line represents a relationship: God – Husband; God – Wife; and Husband – Wife. Both husband and wife have an individual relationship with God as well as a relationship with each other.
 2. As the spouses grow closer to God in their personal relationship with Christ, they also grow closer to each other. This shows the importance of spiritual growth over time.
 3. When each spouse has a healthy and growing relationship with God, their love for Christ is reflected and lived out in the marriage.
 4. Spiritual stagnation and/or backsliding in one spouse's individual relationship with God gradually leads to deterioration of marital and family relationships as well.
 5. Marriages in which one spouse is a believer and the other is not ("unequally yoked") and marriages of two unbelievers lead to unbalanced and misshapen triangles.
- The spiritual dimension of marriage is the most intimate and core component of marriage because all other aspects of the relationship are developed out of it.

A Triangular Model of Love

TRIANGLE 2: COMMITMENT (1) – EMOTIONAL INTIMACY (2) – PASSION (3)



1. Marriages that are healthy and growing will display the following three major aspects of love: Commitment (1), Emotional Intimacy (2), and Passion (3).
2. Each aspect of love interacts with the others; they are interrelated.
3. If you want your marital love to deepen over time, you can't simply be strong in one area and ignore the others.
4. If love is going to stand the test of time, it must be built upon a good foundation.
5. If a couple's decision to marry (or to stay married) is based on a shallow concept of love, the marriage can become endangered when feelings of love wane.

COMMITMENT (1)

Commitment (1) = Christ-like, self-sacrificial love (Agape)

1. The Commitment (1) side of love is a decision/choice that one person makes to sacrificially love another.
2. The Greek word "Agape" best describes this Christ-like, self-sacrificial love. Agape love is repeatedly used in the New Testament to describe Christ's love toward us and what our love should be toward others.
3. Agape love is unique in that it focuses on the well-being and good fortune of the other person without requiring or demanding that the other person responds in kind.
4. Christ is our example: "But God commendeth his love [agape] toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." *Romans 5:8.*
5. The Commitment (1) side of love is evident when couples decide to marry and stay together for richer, for poorer, for better, or for worse. It is not based on feelings that go up and down due to situational factors or how much love the other person "deserves" at any given time.
6. Commitment (1) is the foundation of trust in a marriage.
7. With the Commitment (1) side of love solidly in place, couples can freely build the second aspect of love in this model: Emotional Intimacy (2).

A Triangular Model of Love

EMOTIONAL INTIMACY (2)

Emotional Intimacy (2) = Affection (Storge) + Friendship (Phileo)

1. Use of the word intimacy in this model refers to Emotional Intimacy (2), not sexual intimacy. The Emotional Intimacy (2) side of love is the result of blending two important aspects of love.

Affection (Greek = Storge).

- This aspect refers to familial affection and care.
- In a marital relationship, this is lived out when one spouse intentionally focuses on expressions of love that are helpful and meaningful to the other spouse.
- It is essential to remember we each tend to *express* love the way we like to *receive* love, rather than focusing on what makes our spouse feel loved.
- Affection, as a part of Emotional Intimacy (2), is not about physical intimacy.
- We are truly affectionate when we purposefully and regularly apply the combination of quality time, words of affirmation, gifts, acts of service and physical touch that is meaningful to our spouse.

Friendship (Greek = Phileo).

- This aspect refers to the regular communication of thoughts, feelings, hopes and disappointments, etc. between spouses.
 - Friendship grows as couples spend time together and develop a collection of memories and experiences unique or special to them as a couple.
 - In the emotional/relational sense it is the experience of “knowing and being known.”
2. Emotional Intimacy (2) allows couples to share their hearts and feel they are “best friends.”
 3. Due to the safety and trust of Commitment (1) and the emotional connection and expression of Emotional Intimacy (2), couples have the opportunity to experience Passion (3).

PASSION (3)

Passion (3) = Romantic & sexual love that encompasses heart, soul, mind, and body (Eros)

1. The Passionate (3) side of love is the exciting and exhilarating part of love that creates the feeling of “being in love.”
2. Romance often occurs as an expression of focused Emotional Intimacy (2). Romance is the bridge between Emotional Intimacy (2) and Passion (3). Romance allows couples to experience times of being very close, emotionally and relationally, in a way that rekindles their Passionate (3) love.
3. True Passion (3) connects deeply with the heart, mind, body, and soul of your spouse.
4. The foundation of Commitment (1) and Emotional Intimacy (2) allows a couple’s Passionate (3) feelings and sexual relationship the opportunity to draw them closer together.
5. It is important to remember that while Passion (3) is an intense and exciting expression of love, it is only experienced periodically (versus continuously) and is heavily dependent upon the health of Commitment (1) and Emotional Intimacy (2).

A Triangular Model of Love

HOW THE TYPES OF LOVE WORK TOGETHER

While certainly an oversimplification, let's consider each of the sides of love in the following way:

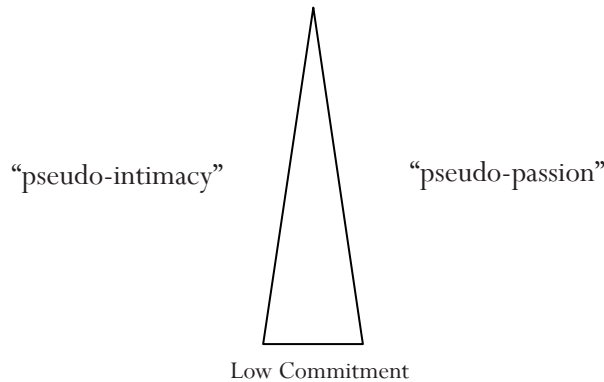
Commitment (1) = Self-Sacrifice **Emotional Intimacy (2)** = Friendship **Passion (3)** = Excitement

- Every couple's triangle is constantly changing shape and size.
- While, theoretically, having all sides of the triangle balanced is the goal, life simply does not allow it to stay that way for very long.
- Conflict, hurt, and/or damage to any side of the triangle will affect the other sides.

Example One: During a time when the husband is sick with the stomach flu, the Commitment (1) side of love must be the strongest. During times like these the Emotional Intimacy (2) side of love may be gently nurtured while the Passionate (3) side is put "on hold." Under the circumstances, this "imbalance" is necessary and will hopefully change as soon as the husband's health returns. It is important to note that when the Passionate (3) side is waning during the illness, the Commitment (1) and Emotional Intimacy (2) sides must make up the balance.

Example Two: Danger Ahead! – Low commitment with high "pseudo-intimacy" and high "pseudo-passion".

1. When the commitment side of love is weak, a couple may be in a serious crisis because the foundation of the marriage is threatened.
2. When a spouse tries to get his/her needs met in unhealthy and unbiblical ways, he or she may "seek fulfillment" elsewhere through fantasy or extramarital affairs.
3. The triangle below shows the unbalanced shape of "counterfeit love" that occurs in an affair. High "pseudo-intimacy" and "pseudo-passion," countered with very little commitment.

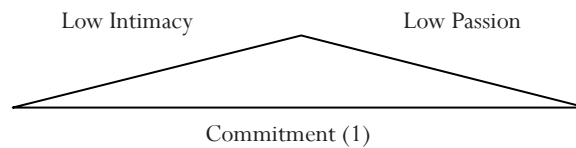


Example Three: If the Commitment (1) and trust between husband and wife has been damaged by hurtful choices and actions, both Emotional Intimacy (2) and Passion (3) will suffer greatly. Likewise, it is very important for trust, safety, affection, and friendship to be built first before the openness of the Passionate (3) side of the relationship can be experienced as God designed it.

A Triangular Model of Love

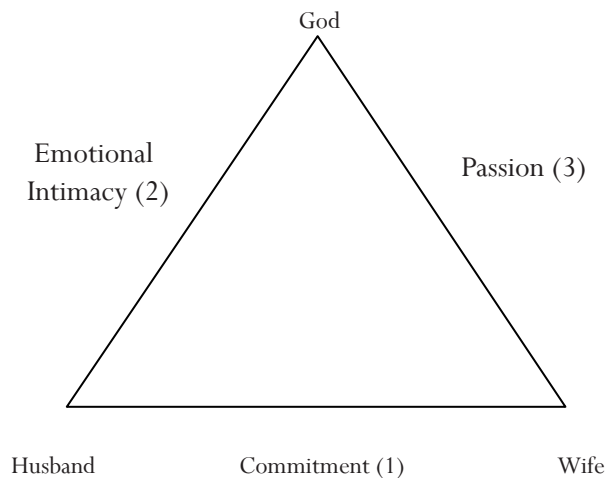
Example Four: Dry and Burned Out Marriages – Low Intimacy and Low Passion with High Commitment (1).

1. An unfortunately common triangle arrangement is one in which Commitment (1) is high but Emotional Intimacy (2) and Passion (3) are low.
2. These couples may have been together for years, but may barely know how to have a conversation together about their relationship.
3. They are married out of “duty” and they stay married because of Commitment (1).
4. Even though they are committed to staying married, they are missing much of what God designed their marriage to be.



TRIANGLE 3: AN INTEGRATED CHRISTIAN MODEL OF LOVE

Triangle three is a composite showing Triangles 1 and 2 superimposed onto each other.



1. This model shows that a husband and wife who share Commitment (1) for each other (and who are growing together towards God) will be able to experience Emotional Intimacy (2) and Passion (3) for each other (and for God).
2. In a relational sense, they have (1) deepening commitment and trust with each other, (2) a growing friendship and show affection to each other, and (3) they experience excitement and desire for each other.
3. In a spiritual sense, they have (1) deepening commitment and maturity of their faith, (2) a growing relationship with Christ, and (3) a feeling of excitement about what God has done for them and what He can do for others.

A Triangular Model of Love

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Some Notes about Commitment (1).

- While Commitment (1) is something that one spouse can do alone, both spouses must work together to deepen Emotional Intimacy (2) and Passion (3).
- It is important that couples do not harm the Commitment (1) level of their marital love by making threats of divorce in the middle of heated arguments. If this is occurring in your relationship, you should strongly consider seeking marital counseling.

Some Notes about Emotional Intimacy (2).

- The Emotional Intimacy (2) side of love is critical for the success of a marriage.
- Emotional Intimacy (2) is one of the easiest parts of a marriage to neglect. This neglect can occur because of overly busy schedules, such as what often occurs when children come along.
- During engagement, couples spend a significant amount of time developing Emotional Intimacy (2); however, after marriage it takes time, effort and Commitment (1) to make sure that it is nurtured.

Some Notes about Passion (3).

- The Passionate (3) side of love is deeply connected to the Emotional Intimacy (2) side. When the Emotional Intimacy (2) side of love is suffering in a marriage, it is predictable that the Passionate (3) side will also suffer.
- Couples must protect and take time to nurture their Emotional Intimacy (2) side if they want to have a healthy Passion (3) side.
- While certainly closely related, it is important not to confuse Emotional Intimacy (2) with Passion (3).
- Remember your marriage needs both: times of Emotional Intimacy (2) that *do not* move into Passion (3) and times of Emotional Intimacy (2) that *do* lead to Passion (3).

Final Notes:

- It is important for couples to monitor and be aware of the shape of their triangles at any given time.
- Remember that perfectly balanced triangles are the *theoretical* goal in this model. Individual circumstances and life transitions in each couple's relationship will cause unique variations in the shape of their triangle over time.
- Couples who notice that a side of their triangle needs attention can seek to bolster it by building that side (and the other sides) of their marriage.
- Maintaining your individual relationship with Christ is the best way to make sure love in your marriage stays strong.

References

“Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.”

Sternberg, R. J. “A Triangular Model of Love.” *Psychological Review* 93 (1986): 119-135.

Chapman, G. *The Five Love Languages*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2004.

Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1988.

Copyright 2008-2016 by Apostolic Christian Counseling and Family Services. Can be freely copied and redistributed.

Not to be sold. For the latest version of this document, please visit www.accounseling.org/premaritalresources.