Valentine’s Day is upon us, and couples and merchants scramble to show that love is important and should be celebrated. But what is love, and how do we know when we’ve found it? Love has captivated the attention of poets and philosophers for centuries and has shown itself to be a difficult concept for many to conceptualize. For those impacted by abuse and neglect, though, love can be scary, misunderstood, and painful. For many, it feels like something unattainable and not to be trusted.

For those that have been abused, “love” may have been wielded as a weapon (i.e. “I’m only doing this because I love you” or “If you really loved me, you would…”). In this manner, love becomes an emotional trap that holds a person hostage while s/he is being intentionally harmed. “Love” may become sexualized in cases of molestation, where sexuality becomes a poor substitute for a child’s need for nurturance and compassion. In cases of neglect, the child’s innate need for nurturance, compassion, and protection are unmet due to the caregiver’s emotional unavailability; often due to their own mental health, substance abuse, or relationship issues. In these cases, the child grows up a longing for attachment and love, but due to not having these needs met, also feels unworthy of attaining love and unsure of how to attain love. It is this issue I want to reflect on more.

Secure, or healthy, attachment is the core of healthy development, feelings of belonging, and feelings of being loved. This attachment allows a young child to explore his or her world with a sense of increasing confidence, knowing that at any time security, support, comfort, and concern can be found by returning to the loved one to “recharge”. When this attachment is not present, the child feels lost and alone and horribly overwhelmed by a world that is big and new and complex. This child longs for a safe place to feel secure, supported and comforted; but finds that none exists, or that if there is one available, it is unpredictably available. The child, propelled by this deep longing for love and attachment, then tries to modify his or her behavior, believing that s/he must have done something wrong – or worse, that something is wrong with him or her that makes him or her unlovable.

This deep seated fear of being unworthy of love may drive behaviors that become either highly rebellious (i.e. I will act out so that people don’t like me because I am doing bad things.) or that become highly compliant (i.e. If I am perfect, then I will earn someone’s love). In this way, the child grows into an adult both desperately needing love and attachment and equally fearful of not being worthy of attaining it. Emotions become disconnected or dampened in an attempt to push the fear out and to appear “normal.” Relationships are approached with the thought of “what do I need to do or say to make you love me.” Yet, even when a healthy relationship arrives, feelings of love are distrusted and discounted with the fear that it is just a matter of time before the bottom falls out.

So, what can be done to heal this deep wound? First, I think, is the need to start with a definition of love that differentiates healthy love from some of the ways love is warped by abuse and neglect. Love, in its purest sense, is the unconditional positive regard for another. It is the ability to put another’s needs first and to help the other become their best self. Love is a feeling of attachment, of connectedness to another human being that is given, not earned. It is a feeling, but also a choice. A choice to continually work to build, repair, and rebuild a relationship that, because we are human, will be broken intentionally and unintentionally as we continue to grow into our best selves. Love is a continual sharing of care, compassion, and concern; even when life gets hard. Love is leaning into another person and finding strength in holding each other up. Love allows each person to have their own individuality and their own time to pursue individual interests or pursuits, while also creating a sense of “we” that celebrates time together and creates something greater than the sum of its parts. Love may be celebrated sexually, but is not sex. Love is knowing that someone sees the best and the worst in me and chooses to reflect on the best parts.

Once we have a working definition of healthy love, the next step is to reflect on the ways I seek to attain love. Is the focus on people pleasing, changing my behavior, becoming the person I think I need to be in order to be accepted in a relationship? Or am I able to rest in the knowledge that I am valuable for who I am and that I am worthy of being loved. I need to stop trying to earn love, because when I try to earn love, I am focused on myself and am prone to see relationship problems as my failings. I am not free to weigh whether relational difficulties are my responsibility or my partners.

Next, I need to explore my willingness to feel emotion. If I have numbed emotion through substances or dissociation (cutting off my awareness), I have decreased my ability to feel positive feelings as well as negative feelings. Can I feel love from another person? Am I allowing myself to receive from others expressions of care, concern, and compassion? If I have not received this in the past, it may feel awkward and anxiety producing. Can I accept the feelings anyway, even if I cannot fathom a reason that someone else should love me? If this is a struggle for you, it may help to think about where this is manageable, such as with children or animals – those that are less likely to feel threatening to us.

Finally, I need to explore whether I can trust feelings of love to be true when they are expressed to me. This is a difficult task and involves more skills than can be addressed in this post. Questions to start you off might be – Do the person’s actions match their words? Do I feel built up or torn down in this relationship? Does the person continue to show care and compassion when life gets hard? Are they able to take ownership when they mess up? (Remember, we all make mistakes. It is the ability to repair a break of trust that determines the health of a relationship, not the absence of breaks.)

I hope you found this musing helpful. Check out Robin’s Hope groups for more information. Have a Happy Valentine’s Day and know that whether you are in a loving relationship now or not, you are worthy of being loved and the world is a better place with you in it!