

What fuels passion? An integrative review of competing theories of romantic passion

Carswell & Impett (2021)

Where do your feelings of romantic passion come from?

Limerence theory

This theory suggests that the obsession and rumination component in passion (i.e., limerence) comes from being uncertain about whether the person likes you back (e.g., if they played hard to get), and when you are sure they do like you (e.g., if you got married), limerence dissipates significantly.

Generally findings about whether rumination leads to more passion are mixed but there is a great deal of evidence supporting the association between responsiveness and ease with being with someone (e.g., not playing hard to get) and passion, with some exceptions with attachment style and physical attractiveness of the potential partner.



Rate of change in intimacy model

This model on the other hand suggests that passion comes from more intimacy (e.g., closeness) whether it be romantic or sexual such that if intimacy is not increasing then passion will decline. The best approach then is to ration your intimacy, hold back from telling your partner too much and try not to do too many new activities together at once!

Evidence supports the association between passion and intimacy but does not support the suggestion that unchanging or very high intimacy results in less passion and there is some exception with attachment style (e.g., avoidant attachment suggest less passion with greater intimacy).

Self expansion model

This model assumes that everyone has a fundamental motivation to self expand (e.g., learn more about yourself and gain more characteristics and perspectives) and thus so long as you do so with your partner your passion will remain strong. However, after fully incorporating your partner's traits into yourself (e.g., fully expanding) your passion will decline, but can be revived by doing new and exciting things together.

The issue here is that evidence suggests that not everyone has this fundamental motivation for self expansion. Evidence also suggests that people choose partners mostly not by whether they will promote greater self expansion but rather based on how similar they are because it's easier to partner with them.



Triangular theory of Love

This model suggests that passion comes from arousal (e.g., physical or sexual attraction) arising from having your needs fulfilled whether sexual or not (e.g., self-esteem, submission) to help support your goals, and that once fulfilled, passion would decline. The best way to increase passion then is to identify another need to fulfill.

There is not much evidence on this theory but there is evidence that people generally tend to draw closer to those who meet their needs and less so when the goal is achieved. But, which needs are of utmost importance for facilitating passion is still to be researched.



In short, limerence theory suggests passion comes from playing hard to get, rate of change model suggests passion comes from closeness and self disclosure, while self expansion suggests passion comes from disclosure from your partner, and the triangular theory of love suggests that passion comes from need fulfillment.

The ultimate source of passion may likely be a mix of all these sources. However, without considering how these models and theories conflict, interact and might be integrated, we may overlook new or more precise ways to cultivate passion. We hope that this review will inspire new, more refined models of romantic passion that integrate across these theories and models.