

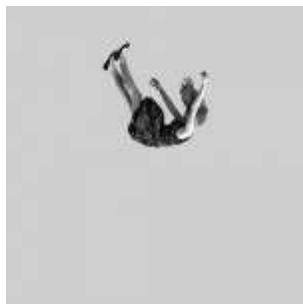
I think I'm falling in love

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Many important decisions have been made on the basis that someone has fallen in love with another person. It could be the reason for marrying another person. Or perhaps it could be the reason to begin a sexual relationship with a person. Perhaps, more innocently, it could motivate a person to begin courting with another person with whom they're infatuated. Or, less innocently, it might be used as a reason to commit adultery, or to seek a divorce in order to pursue a new relationship. The problem with falling in love is that people also seem to fall out of love. Any decisions made on the basis of being in love can be reversed because one is no longer in love. (Think conscious uncoupling.)

Except that many of the consequences of such decisions cannot be reversed. A couple can't unmake any children they've conceived together. And one can't erase the memories accumulated over weeks, months or years of a relationship. But this is just the messy reality of the human heart, right? After all, you can't help who you fall in love with. Or can you?



I think the main issue at hand is a question of semantics. It's a quaint idiom, 'falling in love', isn't it? Falling implies helplessness, but it can also imply painfully hitting the ground. And then the word 'love' is open to widely varying interpretation. (I'm tempted to launch into a rant about the 4 great types of love, but I think I'll reserve that for another post.) There's a sense of uncontrollably entering into an excited state of impulsive attraction. But that's where I feel the problem lies. While this idea perhaps suitably describes the *feeling* involved, it doesn't necessarily reflect the process or *mechanism* of what is happening.

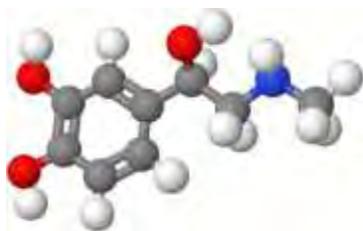


To reflect a little further on the topic of feelings, this can be biologically reduced to the neurological and physiological pathways stimulated by various hormones:

(Just in case the science goes over your head, there's a tl;dr beneath)

Testosterone & Eostrogen

These are the sex hormones which, amongst other things, provide sex drive. In other words, these hormones compel the organism to seek a sexual partner.



Adrenalin

The 'flight or fight' hormone that responds to stress. When meeting a attractive person, the developing excitement releases this hormone which diverts blood away from vital organs towards the limbs. It create the butterfly effect, the sense of nervousness and edginess as if one were about to react very quickly to a stimulus.

Dopamine

This hormone is released as a reward for a fulfilled desire. It is released when one spends time with the object of one's affection, or even just thinking about that person. The closer one grows in relationship with another person, the stronger the sense of reward.

Serotonin

Falling in love leads to obsessions; this is the hormone responsible. Associated with compulsive obsessions, this hormone serves the opposite of dopamine, punishing the person for failing to spend time thinking about or being with the object of their affection. 'I can't live without him/her' is the kind of overwhelming response to an unhealthy obsession created by serotonin.

There are other hormones at work in falling in love, especially in the context of the sexual relationship. Oxytocin (the bonding hormone, or trust hormone) is released during orgasm, which helps bond a couple together. (It is also released during breastfeeding, helping mother bond with baby.) Vasopressin is the hormone responsible for creating long-term commitment. So it's perhaps encouraging, especially for men, that those with commitment worries are actually biologically programmed to develop commitment.

TL;dr – the bottom line is that we are at the mercy of chemicals in our bodies that make us feel the way we feel. We can't help feeling the way we feel, as these feelings are natural responses to the stimuli around us. It's not good, it's not bad, it's just natural.

But the thing about feelings is that we shouldn't be slaves to them. Anger is neither a good nor a bad feeling, but how we respond to it matters. Flipping out every time one gets angry isn't helpful, nor is bottling up resentment. Growing in maturity and learning how to be responsible is – as the word responsible suggests – growing in the *ability to respond* appropriately. So when one feels angry, one finds a healthy way to respond to that anger. Likewise, when one feels like 'falling in love' one must respond appropriately. It is virtually universally accepted that falling in love with a child does not justify paedophilia. Yet what is going on when one feels like falling in love?



Moving on to the process of mechanism of falling in love, and again returning to semantics, I feel it would be incredibly helpful to replace the phrase 'falling in love' with 'growing in attachment'. Psychologically speaking, when one falls in love, one is developing an emotional attachment to someone. In a healthy person, we should be emotionally attached to many people – our parents, our siblings, our friends, our teachers – and thus it is justifiable, in my view, to be able to fall in love with anybody. Falling in love should simply reflect that there is a strong emotional connection between two people that results in an affectionate attachment. These attachments need not be sexual in nature. I feel like I have fallen in love with every single one of my children, having developed a deep emotional bond of affection with each of them. The problem with falling in love, then, is that we are as a population psychologically unhealthy: Emotional attachment is abnormal in contemporary society. Children, especially teenagers, are not close with their parents; students are not close with their teachers; siblings are not close with each other. Some of these phenomena could be excused by saying it's normal. But just because something is normal doesn't necessarily mean it's natural, nor should normality equate with health. If it's normal to have unhealthy emotional attachments then I don't want to be normal.

Returning to the sphere of romantic coupling, one cannot help experiencing the feelings of falling in love, but one can choose how to respond. Especially if one is able to observe the initial stages of emotional excitement in the context of a relationship, one can quickly decide what type of relationship to pursue. A young man, for example, who feels strongly attracted to a young woman may decide that since this young woman is not his wife, nor since is unprepared to commit to a formal courtship with this person, the relational status should be that of a brother and a sister, entailing respectful boundaries but not necessarily rejecting strong emotional feelings. I remember the first time I experienced a strong emotional feeling for a non-familial female as a teenager and was surprised by how strong the friendship could be without the confusion of a sexual dynamic; it was liberating. In the context of a courtship, boundaries must still be maintained and the emotional attachment ought to remain in the sphere of friendship. Upon the foundation of a healthy friendship, true conjugal love can blossom.



But it's in the context of a committed relationship where falling in love is no longer something to respond to but actually choose to do. In this sense, you can choose who you fall in love with: If one has fallen out of love with one's spouse, it is imperative to fall back in love with this person, especially if there are children involved. Putting aside major transgressions for which a divine level of forgiveness is required, it is quite possible for a couple to make the conscientious choice to fall back in love. If one is aware of the above-mentioned hormones, it's simply a question of recreating the environments that will allow them to have their effect. Perhaps I could dedicate another post or two on how to create the environment in which attachment can be forged, but I could summarise the whole process in two words: true love. And by true love I'm not referring to some fuzzy abstract concept, a feeling or a state of mind, but the active pursuit of living for the sake of the other. When one makes an effort to practise love for another person, one falls in love with that person. A baby can be incredibly annoying and frustrating, demanding attention and care when one might not feel like providing it. But through sacrificing oneself for the sake of the baby's needs, one actually forges a deeper emotional bond, if one loves willingly and patiently.

The same is true for a romantic relationship. By serving one another with the intention of meeting the other person's needs, without resentment but with patient sincerity, the emotional channels can open up to reignite one's passion for one's lover. Perhaps falling is no longer the appropriate word, since it is more like climbing in love, or digging in love, or investing in love, or expanding in love. But once those hormones kick in, one is helpless to the intoxicating yet healthy feelings that ensue, and I suppose one could justifiably say that one has fallen in love yet again.

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