

Originally published June 1, 2000

It isn't love until you've fallen out of it

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Reader comments: Joanne Reetz said, "I was smart enough to live with my boyfriend before we got married. After a year and a half, the love did not grow but diminished to zip. Your words were so right on!!!!!"

Easy sex before marriage is the best thing that ever happened to marriage.

In the old days, teenagers leaped to the altar so they could leap without shame into bed. What propelled two young people to marriage was lust that talked itself into love.

Once the bonfire burned down, the same conventions that compelled those kids to get married also scared them away from divorce. Marriages lasted longer, and some thrived as partners held each other's hand through muddy, rushing rivers.

But many marriages died. Nobody looks toward those rigid, bitter pairings as examples of lasting love.

Today, the friends and family of 20-year-olds at the altar no longer murmur, "How darling they are! What a long life they'll have ahead of them."

Instead, the sages sigh, shake their heads and whisper "Foolishness. This won't last."

Anybody who got married young, even older couples who are still happy, will tell you it's good news, then, that more people are waiting before they vow fidelity for life.

In Michigan, about 20,000 fewer couples are getting married each year than did in the 1970s. According to a Wednesday story in the Free Press, the only age group in which the number of marriages is growing is that over 35.

Most of us can agree that the longer you've lived, the smarter you become about love, the better to recognize its imposters.

Dr. Beverly Talan, a Birmingham therapist, was quoted saying: "Younger people fall in love, and that's such a wonderful feeling that they don't know yet that that's an illusion."

When is it really love?

What? Love an illusion?

Love is no illusion, but it doesn't happen when you fall into it. It happens when you climb out of it, out of the can't-live-without-you quicksand, and stand apart, on your own two feet, and contemplate your partner and say, "You're no bargain -- but I guess I'm not either. Yet I love you. I even like you."

Liking your partner is essential. Loving each other gets you over the big humps. Liking each other -- simple affection -- gets you through an average day, through 365 days, or 3,650, or more.

I offer free advice to any friend contemplating marriage: Live with your partner for a full four seasons, not just through cherry blossoms and sunshine, but through slush and cold and salt stains, through busted plumbing and a week-long flu and a three-day power outage.

Measure your affection on the gray days.

Paint a room together or -- as my husband and I did -- an old refrigerator.

Host a Thanksgiving dinner with both of your families.

Your partner's annoying ways will ooze like grease from a pot roast. So will yours.

You may both think, "What fool was I to love this fool?"

If you were married, you would be contemplating divorce. Instead, this is an opportunity. Only now can you see each other clearly, in the bright light of disillusionment.

Now you can freely choose.

As for sex: Have lots of it early on. Have so much that you finally don't want any more for a while.

Are you still happy? Does it feel good to go grocery shopping together?

That's when you'll know you're pals. That's when you'll know you're in love.