

Unconditional Love

A short discussion document on the subject of unconditional love and its benefits for human growth and potential. The document comprises a series of articles, in part extracts from Wikipedia and eminent human psychologists, supplemented by notes from the author.

The document is organised in three parts:

- Part 1 contains articles that explore different aspects of unconditional love.
- Part 2 shares ideas on how unconditional love can benefit relationships in various contexts.
- Part 3 provides references for extracts used in this article.

You are welcome to discuss any part of this document by emailing me at mike@justlisten.uk

Mike O'Sullivan

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www.justlisten.uk

"I love to love unconditionally...

... it is the only thing I do really well."

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PART ONE

Article 1 - Unconditional love versus conditional love

I realised many years ago that a major emotional pattern of mine was seeking unconditional love. And in the first throes of love, I remember feeling that I had found it again. Sadly, it did not last. As the relationship became more entwined, slowly and stealthily conditional love took over unconditional love. What I mean by this is: love became conditional on meeting certain wishes of each other.

In the 'conditional love' situation, we may comply to 'keep the peace' or we may reject our partner's wishes to protect our autonomy or entitlement of unconditional love. The consequence being: 'not feeling loved because our conditions are not met or our autonomy or entitlement has been compromised'.

Neither is good for the relationship, and neither nurtures the benefits of unconditional love. Sadly, we now have the conditions for our relationship to break up.

Article 2 - Unconditional Positive Regard

Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987), an American psychologist founded the client-centered approach to psychology. He maintained that an individual needed an environment that provided them with genuineness, authenticity, openness, self-disclosure, acceptance, empathy, and approval. He proposed the concept of 'Unconditional Positive Regard' not only in social and familial situations, but also in therapy situations as well. It is through unconditional positive regard that change happens because the individual can feel that openness, love, and ability to be themselves again which fosters a true desire to change for the right reasons.

Article 3 - Unconditional Love and human potential...

Viktor Frankl (1905 – 1997), an Austrian psychiatrist, founded a school of psychotherapy that describes a search for a life's meaning as the central human motivational force.

In his autobiographical book *Man's Search for Meaning*, based on his experiences in various Nazi concentration camps, he draws parallels

between the human capacity to love unconditionally and living a meaningful life. Frankl wrote:

"Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true."

For Frankl, unconditional love is a means by which we enable and reach human potential.

Article 4 - Parental Unconditional Love

Parental love is said to be the best example of unconditional love which is affection without any limitations, or love without conditions. Our parents were in love with us totally and gave us our first experience of unconditional love.

As a new born baby, we had neither the facility to judge ourselves nor impose conditions on ourselves. We were total unaware of our being and without any concept of who we were or would become.

Then something changed.

In order for us to conform to familial and societal 'norms', we needed to be 'conditioned'. Effectively, learning about ourselves through the filters of the family and society into which we were born. As a result, 'conditional love' took over from 'unconditional love'.

Some authors on this subject make a distinction between conditional love and unconditional love. In conditional love, love is earned on the basis of conditions being met, whereas in unconditional love, love is given freely.

How we experience our parent's 'unconditional' and 'conditional love' affects how we internalise our view of ourselves. We can either be set up to have self-confidence, self-acceptance and authenticity, or low self-esteem, low self-worth and a life of false pretences.

Article 5 - Unconditional love in adult life

In my adult life, my happiness and sense of achievement were highly affected by my internalised negative view of myself. This view came as a direct result of the conditional love I received in my childhood, some of which was very harsh.

I sought ways to contradict my negative view, and worked hard to present a positive facade to the world. I remember always seeking unconditional love in my relationships. This might be with my partner, my therapist or a loyal friend.

Needless to say, seeking unconditionally love became a lifelong quest. There were short-lived moments when I did experience unconditional love, for example: in my therapy sessions or when starting a new relationship. But sadly, human beings have an inherent propensity for insecurity, which makes giving and receiving unconditional love a challenge in any relationship.

I know one way to overcome this challenge is to believe in a super being, such as a God. If you do, then you have a source of unconditional love. If you don't, and you put your faith in another human being, your success depends on your ability to work with each others' conditional love - not an easy choice. Often, the easiest choice is to end the relationship.

But maybe we have another choice. If you agree that the only person you are capable of changing is yourself then consider this:

Maybe you are the only one capable of giving yourself unconditional love. And if you did, you might be more capable of giving unconditional love too. This may start the process of getting unconditional love back into your life.

“Without a therapist, a lover or a belief in God, maybe the only person who can love you unconditionally, is you.”

Article 6 - Learning to Love Unconditionally

A definition of unconditional love:

“**Unconditional love** is known as affection without any limitations, or love without conditions. Each area of expertise has a certain way of describing unconditional love, but most will agree that it is that type of love which has no bounds and is unchanging.

I am certain we are all capable of giving unconditional love, especially at times when it is important to us, such as when we have a newly born baby or when we fall in love. But maybe there are other times in our relationships where our distresses prevent us from loving unconditionally, and yet we know if we did, we would probably get a better outcome.

Learning to love unconditionally requires us to understand the process of loving unconditionally and the barriers that might hinder us.

The Process

Unconditional listening is essential to unconditional love which is listening without judgement or personal agenda.

Generally this kind of listening is difficult for us because as a child growing up we experienced ‘conditional love’ which sets us up to be judgemental and to have insecurities. Consequently, when we listen to someone, we are subconsciously pre-occupied with protecting ourselves, which we achieve by interrupting them to put over our point of view and show them where they are wrong.

Unconditional listening requires us to put on hold our personal agenda, our need to judge, and to put to one side our insecurities. When we can do this, we have the foundation for developing unconditional love in any relationship.

Unconditional Positive Regard is another essential component of unconditional love. Carl Rogers maintained that an individual needs an environment that provides them with genuineness, authenticity, openness, self-disclosure, acceptance, empathy, and approval. It is through unconditional positive regard that change happens because the individual can feel that openness, love, and ability to be themselves again which fosters a true desire to change for the right reasons.

Unconditional faith in someone is another component which requires us to hold out beliefs for the individual when they do not have faith in themselves. Beliefs such as: they can work it out, they can change and they can aspire to their dreams.

The essential ingredients of unconditional love are therefore a combination of unconditional listening, unconditional positive regard and unconditional faith in an individual's ability and desire to be authentic, genuine and achieve their aspirations.

The Barriers

As I wrote earlier, we are capable of giving unconditional love, apart from when our distresses get in our way. By distresses I mean anything that prevents us being genuine, authentic, open, self-disclosing, accepting, empathetic and approving.

It could be our insecurities, or a misinformed messages about ourselves that we believe is true, or a negative emotional pattern learnt in our childhood. For example, a negative pattern I learnt about myself when I was a child was: 'I am never good enough and I need to please people in order to feel good enough'. I am sure you have them too.

Our challenge is to free ourselves from these negative beliefs and patterns in order to restore our capacity for unconditional love in any relationship.

My approach was to commit to a journey of self-awareness, self-examination and self-acceptance. And today, I am still on that journey.

Self-awareness was a matter of getting to know who I am today, what beliefs I hold dearly and what insecurities inhibit me. To my mind, it is a never-ending journey, but now I have started it and experienced the benefits, my commitment has grown stronger.

Self-examination is not only finding out how I got to become who I am today, but also how I can change any misinformed beliefs, negative emotional patterns and insecurities. It is about remembering and reviewing old memories in order to determine what misinformed my early decisions and beliefs. Then, it is up to me to change my dysfunctional beliefs and make new decisions.

Self-acceptance is a matter of embracing both my positive character traits as well as my hidden negative traits, including misinformed beliefs and

insecurities. My challenge was to accept that what I believed to be true about myself was not true and needed to be re-evaluated. In my experience, I needed someone to work with me who had the capacity to give me unconditional love whilst I worked on myself. With their support, I was able to change.

In summary

If we find ourselves failing to give unconditional love in situations that require it, then it is most probably because we have issues of our own to contend with. So, if we want to learn how to give unconditional love in certain situations, then we need to work on ourselves in the three areas of self-awareness, self-examination and self-acceptance.

In order to take this journey, I needed someone who knew how to listen to me without judgement, someone who regarded me with openness and understanding and someone who had faith in my potential, and that is someone with the capacity for unconditional love.

PART TWO

Unconditional love in context

So far I have explored a range of views on the subject of unconditional love. Now, I want to discuss the difference contexts in which unconditional love plays a part.

Unconditional love of newborn baby

When we give love to a newborn baby, it is a love without any expectations or conditions. In our eyes, they are perfect just exactly the way they are. We just want everything to be right for them to grow and be happy. Parental love is said to be the best example of unconditional love which is affection without any limitations, or love without conditions. Our parents give us our first experience of unconditional love.

Unconditional love in a love affair

When we fall in love, it has similarities to parental love in as much as we experience affection without limitations and conditions. It is like a reminder of

our babyhood when we felt unconditionally loved. Although, in one respect it is different, it is mutual. We are both giving and receiving unconditional love. You must have heard the expression 'love is blind'. It means we are oblivious to each other's negative traits and only see each other's positive points. This is an example of unconditional love (faith) where we totally believe we have found 'the one' and it will last forever. Even though we are well qualified in the 'conditional love' arena, we hold back to give our blossoming relationship time to develop.

Unconditional love in bringing up children

After the initial euphoria of a new baby, we realise we have a job to do. As responsible parents we want our new born to grow up into a confident and successful adult. Their future well-being and success depends, therefore, on our ability to teach them the rights and wrongs of adult life. This is where 'conditional love' begins to play its part in our parenting. Children learn how to behave based on what wins our approval or love and what doesn't. This is how conditional love works.

As I wrote earlier in Article 4, how we experience our parent's 'unconditional' and 'conditional love' affects how we internalise our view of ourselves. We can either be set up to have self-confidence, self-acceptance and authenticity, or low self-esteem, low self-worth and a life hiding behind a facade.

We are challenged therefore to get the balance right, and not over play one love at the detriment of the other. Whatever we want our children to be, it is incumbent on us to maintain the 'unconditional love' side of our parenting.

It is our unconditional love that reveals the essential qualities of our children as they grow. It is our unconditional love that supports their potential and motivation. And, it is our unconditional love that assists our children to fulfil their aspirations and live their dreams.

Unconditional love in therapy

This is where we step into the world of psychotherapists, such as Carl Rogers, Viktor Frankl and Sidney M. Jourard. They are eminent psychotherapists who developed the right environment for clients to flourish. Their approaches embraced openness, authenticity, empathy, approval and

acceptance. Carl Rogers called it 'Unconditional positive regard', Viktor Frankl, proposed unconditional love 'as a means by which we enable and reach our human potential', whilst Sidney M. Jourard referred to it as 'Being known all the way through by at least one person' (The Transparent Self, 1971).

They all maintained that an individual needs an environment that provides them with genuineness, authenticity, openness, self-disclosure, empathy, acceptance and approval. It is through unconditional positive regard and being known by at least one person that we have the opportunity to change. The environment to truly be ourselves, to grow in self-awareness and self-acceptance, leads us naturally to a healthier personality.

Unconditional love and its rightful place in relationships

Unconditional love has its place in all relationships, as does conditional love. In certain contexts, such as a new born baby, or supporting loved-one with life-threatening illness or a love affair, we need no encouragement to give freely our unconditional love. This seems to make giving of unconditional love a situational matter and not just something freely given.

Consequentially, as our baby grows or our loved-one recovers the balance of unconditional and conditional love can easily drift in favour of conditional love. Whether that be one of us or both, it doesn't really matter, our relationship will begin to be troubled by disagreements, irritations, criticism, accusations, blaming and fights.

Remember that conditional love is learnt in our unique family setting and our partner's in another. It is inevitable therefore that conditional love learnt in different family settings will clash. When it comes to who wins, because that is what it is usually about, there isn't a winner. Although, the one with the most forcefully learnt conditioning would appear to come out on top.

If the relationship is important to us, and we don't want to lose it then it is vital that we change the balance in favour of unconditional love. Only then are we able to listen to each other without judgement, regard each other with openness and empathy and have faith in each other's purpose and potential.

PART THREE

References

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