

Unconditional Love

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I grew up reading romance novels, and I was always inspired by the concept of unconditional love. So I loved and loved without expecting anything in return until my heart broke and I had a nervous breakdown. I was diagnosed as a codependent.

Today, after years of wondering whether unconditional love is good or bad, I still believe that it is good, but only in its proper context. By this I mean that there is a season for all things, and there are times when unconditional love is not called for.

Of course, this is more the subject of a book than an article, so let me refer you to *Love Must be Tough*, by James Dobson (Word Publishing). Mr. Dobson, a psychologist, explains in great detail why some people respond in a negative and unhealthy way to unconditional love. Put simply, he says we cannot love those whom we do not respect and we cannot respect those who let us walk all over them.

The situation with my marriage was an extreme case, but what of the whole idea of reciprocal love between normal people. Is there a time and a place to want for something in return? I think there is. What is important to understand about reciprocal love, however, is that you do not ask for it or demand it. It is not something you can control. You simply put yourself in a position to receive it. You make careful decisions about who you marry and who your friends are. If you were abused as a child you do not continue the pattern in your adult life.

There is also another time in which unconditional love is not always the right way to go. This is when you are raising children. Children need large doses of unconditional love, but they also need structure and boundaries, because the expectations you have of them will translate into a sense of responsibility which is the hallmark of maturity. This child will then intuitively gravitate toward people and situations in which they are receiving love as well as giving it. They will end up in an environment where it is safe to love others unconditionally because they are loved unconditionally in return, and, finally, they will learn what it means to feel good about themselves because they have balance in their lives.

In general, I think unconditional love is useful it comes in the form of forgiveness, when it is well received and improves the lives of others, and when we offer it to our Higher Power. However, it is wasted on people who take advantage of our generosity and drag us into abusive relationships because they are not changed by it, and it can give the wrong message when we are raising children who need us to set limits and provide healthy discipline so they will know how to take care of themselves and not take advantage of others.

Finally, when it comes to putting unconditional love in its rightful place, remember that no one can do this for you. You must do your homework (read and talk to your therapist); learn through trial and error what works and what does not work; and, most of all, pray. When the moment comes to make a decision about when to love unconditionally and when to expect a more reciprocal relationship, only you know the right answer.