

# Creating love in the lab: The 36 questions that spark intimacy

February 13 2015, by Yasmin Anwar

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Arthur and Elaine Aron working together during their younger years. Credit: Arthur Aron

Around the time of the Summer of Love in 1967, Arthur Aron, then a UC Berkeley graduate student in psychology, kissed fellow student Elaine Spaulding in front of Dwinelle Hall. What they felt at that

moment was so profound that they soon married and teamed up to investigate the mysteries of attraction and intimacy.

"I fell in love very intensely," said Aron, a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley and research professor at Stony Brook University in New York. "Given that I was studying social psychology, just for fun I looked for the research on love, but there was almost none."

So he took it on. In the nearly 50 years that Arthur and Elaine Aron have studied love, they have developed three dozen [questions](#) to create closeness in a lab setting. The result is not unlike the accelerated [intimacy](#) that can happen between strangers on an airplane or other close quarters.

Those 36 questions were recently popularized in a Modern Love column in the New York Times, and have broken down emotional barriers between thousands of strangers, resulting in friendships, romance and even some marriages. Examples of the questions include:

- Would you like to be famous? In what way?
- Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
- If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?

The latest adaptation of the 36-question method brings together two couples who don't know one another. Each of the four participants must answer the questions out loud. This variation was recently filmed on campus for a Valentine's Day segment on NBC's Today Show, and is scheduled to air Feb. 14.

## Rekindling old flames

Aron, 69, who handed out the question cards for the on-camera experiment, hopes the segment captures the poignancy of the pairs revealing their deepest hopes, dreams and worries. The questions come in three sets of 12 and grow increasingly intense, though participants need not divulge more than they're comfortable revealing.

"When I came in towards the end of each set of questions, there were people crying and talking so openly. It was amazing," he said. "They all seemed really moved by it."

Aron and fellow researchers used the two-couples approach last year in a study on how "self-disclosure" can rekindle romance in long-term couples.

"The theory is, when you're first in a romantic relationship, there's an intense excitement, but then you grow used to each other," Aron said. "If you do something new and challenging, that reminds you of how exciting it can be with your partner, it makes your relationship better."

The Arons, who live in Tiburon, Marin County, and whose son, Elijah, writes for television in Los Angeles, have experimented with this format themselves, using it to deepen connections with their couple friends: "It's a great way to spend an evening," Aron said.

## **Speeding up intimacy among strangers**

Originally formulated for a 1997 study called "The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness," the 36 questions, or variations thereof, have been used in hundreds of studies, including several by UC Berkeley psychologist Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, who studies cross-race friendships, among other things.

Aron uses the questions regularly in his lectures and freshman classes, pairing up students randomly or experimenting with cross-race friendships to better understand prejudice. The questions have even been used to improve understanding between police officers and community members in cities where tensions run high.

Whether this sense of closeness can last in a real-world setting is not guaranteed. While some connections that began in a lab endure, others run their course, just as in real life.

Interestingly, when Arthur and Elaine Aron first looked into how to manipulate a sense of closeness in a lab setting, they were not looking at the romantic implications.

"We had not created the 36 questions to help you fall in love," wrote Elaine Aron, a psychologist and author of *The Highly Sensitive Person* (Broadway Books, 1996), in a *Psychology Today* blog post.

"To do a good job of that, we would have needed to do a study with people who, above all, came into it really wanting to fall in love, and we were not in that business," she wrote. "More important, we would need to follow up over time to know if the relationships lasted, an expensive process, and funding research on [love](#) is not easy."

Nonetheless, that Summer of Love feeling that inspired Aron to study the underlying mechanisms of intimacy continues as he works on numerous studies and projects, many of which require the 36-question approach.

As for his answer to Question No. 1: Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest? He shrugged and pondered.

"Socrates," he said. "Presuming I could get him alive."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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