Love is more complex than '5 love languages,' says expert

February 12 2024

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The "5 Love Languages" popularized by Gary Chapman are often mentioned when discussing relationships, but this Valentine's Day one Virginia Tech psychologist suggests taking a different approach to

fostering and nurturing high-quality, loving relationships.

To understand Louis Hickman's perspective, it's important to also understand the love languages. "In the theory, there are five languages: words of affirmation, physical touch, gifts, quality time, and acts of service," Hickman said. "According to Chapman, we all have a 'primary' love language, and we will experience a high quality relationship when our primary language matches our partner's."

Hickman said that it is a simple solution to a complex problem. "It may have some usefulness for helping people understand one part of the problem, but it is not a silver bullet."

Hickman and his collaborators presented his love languages research last spring at the International Association for Relationship Research's Mini-Conference on Resilience in Interpersonal and Social Environments, and it's been cited in another recent study. He found that matching on your love languages did not predict relationship satisfaction in any meaningful sense, with a few caveats. "Relationship satisfaction suffers when a person strongly desires something their partner does not provide, or when they strongly dislike something that their partner provides."

"While a match between a person and their partner's love language predicted relationship satisfaction, the partners' big five traits—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness, better predicted relationship satisfaction," Hickman said. "In other words, you can predict relationship satisfaction better from your partner's self-reported big five traits than with your and your partner's love languages."

And how this works is no surprise, Hickman said. "People experience higher relationship satisfaction when they and their partner are more emotionally stable and agreeable."

Hickman isn't entirely opposed to the use of love languages, though. "They could potentially be helpful if perhaps your partner feels that you are not providing enough of or too much of one of those types of behaviors."

Hickman said the key to building a successful relationship is both people putting in the effort. "Open, honest communication is necessary and that is not captured in love languages. You must be motivated to improve or maintain the quality of your relationship, know how to effectively do so, and enact that knowledge into behavior."

At the end of the day, Hickman said it takes both people working together to create something special and enduring.

Provided by Virginia Tech

Citation: Love is more complex than '5 love languages,' says expert (2024, February 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2024-02-complex-languages-expert.html