

Love actually: Americans agree on what makes people 'feel the love'

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Saeideh Hishmati is a postdoctoral research scholar in Quantitative Psychology at Penn State's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. Credit: Patrick Mansell

Americans may disagree on many things, but love might not be one of them. According to researchers, people in the U.S. largely agree about what makes them feel loved, coming to a general consensus that it may be small gestures that matter most.

In a study, researchers found that small, non-romantic gestures—like someone showing compassion or snuggling with a child—topped the list of what makes people feel loved. Meanwhile, controlling behaviors—like someone wanting to know where they were at all times—were seen as the least loving.

Saeideh Heshmati, a postdoctoral research scholar who is working with Zita Oravecz in Penn State's College of Health and Human Development, said the study results—published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*—could give insight into how [love](#) affects people's overall well-being.

"Whether we feel loved or not plays an important role in how we feel from day to day," Heshmati said. "We were curious about whether the majority of Americans could agree about what makes people feel loved on a daily basis, or if it was a more personal thing. Our results show that people do agree, and the top scenarios that came back weren't necessarily romantic. So it is possible for people to feel loved in simple, everyday scenarios. It doesn't have to be over-the-top gestures."

The researchers recruited 495 American adults to answer a questionnaire about whether or not they thought most people would feel loved in 60 different scenarios. The situations included positive actions, like being greeted by a pet; neutral scenarios, like feeling close to nature; and negative situations, like someone acting possessive.

After gathering the data, the researchers analyzed it with a cultural consensus model—a framework for measuring the beliefs of a culture.

Heshmati said that while participants disagreed on some items—there was a near-even split, for example, on whether "someone giving you positive feedback on the Internet" was loving or not—there were many instances where the participants agreed.

"We found that behavioral actions—rather than purely verbal expressions—triggered more consensus as indicators of love. For example, more people agreed that a child snuggling with them was more loving than someone simply saying, 'I love you,'" Heshmati said. "You might think they would score on the same level, but people were more in agreement about loving actions, where there's more authenticity perhaps, instead of a person just saying something."

Participants also agreed on what doesn't make people feel loved. Behaviors that could be seen as controlling were ranked among the least loving actions.

"In American culture, it seems that controlling or possessive behaviors are the ones people do not feel loved by," Heshmati said. "If someone wants to know where you are at all times, or acts controlling, those actions are not loving to us. This could be a cultural difference, though. There's research showing that in more communal societies, these types of controlling behaviors may be seen as affection. But here in America we don't see it as loving."

The analysis was also able to identify which demographics had the most knowledge of, or were more in tune with, the cultural consensus.

The [researchers](#) found that men tended to know less about what the majority of the American culture deems loving, which Heshmati said could be because previous research has shown that men tend to think about the concept of love differently than women. Additionally, people in a relationship and people with agreeable or neurotic personality traits

tended to know more about the cultural consensus.

Heshmati said that even though the results may reflect how the American culture in general feels about love, individuals still can and do have their own personal feelings about what makes them feel loved.

"It may not be wise to go into a relationship assuming that both of you know the same things about feeling loved or that all of the same things will make you feel loved," Heshmati said. "I think it's important to communicate these things to each other, which can assist in being more in tune with each other and feeling loved in the relationship."

More information: Saeideh Heshmati et al. What does it mean to feel loved, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2017). DOI: 10.1177/0265407517724600 , [journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/1 ... 177/0265407517724600](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0265407517724600)

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