

Don't Know What the Angular Gyrus Is? Your Heart Does

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“For years, science has relegated our love to this basic instinct, almost like an addiction that has no redeeming value.”

These are not the words of some New Age evangelist preaching from the mount at a couples retreat in Arizona but of Stephanie Cacioppo, a neuroscientist at the University of Chicago who has spent much of her career mapping the dynamics of love in the brain. Her research and some of the theories she has developed put her at odds with other scientists who have described romantic love as an emotion, a primitive drive, even a drug.

Using neuroimaging, Dr. Cacioppo has collected data that could suggest that this kind of love activates not only the emotional brain, but also regions that are involved in higher-level intellectual activities and cognition. “This means that it’s possible that love has a real function — not only to connect with people emotionally but also to improve our behavior,” she said.

Dr. Cacioppo attributes all kinds of mental and physical benefits to being in love. She says it can help you think faster, to better anticipate other people’s thoughts and behavior, or to bounce back more quickly from an illness. “The empirical tests I’ve done in my lab suggest that, in many ways, when you’re in love, you can be a better person,” she said.