

# Love in Mind: Cognitive Trickery

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World literature is teeming with stories of unrequited love. Men and women fall in love and are not loved in return. Or love is mutual and wonderful, and then it fades for just one. Love deepens or dies unpredictably, and far too many lovers end up valuing and caring for someone who simply does not care for and value them in return. There is no literary theme more compelling, or sadder.

This is true of life as well. Love only works when it is balanced, two-way. Indeed, the need for responsiveness is so powerful that lovers often distort reality in order to validate the emotional response they need and desire.

At least that's the theory offered by psychological scientist Edward Lemay of the University of Maryland, who has been studying what he calls "motivational distortion" in relationships. According to Lemay, our desire to bond to another person in a close, committed relationship is so strong that it can bias our thinking—distorting attention and memory and interpretation so that we see and believe what we want to be true. At the first International Convention of Psychological Science, this week in Amsterdam, Lemay discussed his and others' work on this powerful cognitive bias.

Many studies support the basic idea, suggesting such a biased perception of responsiveness in partners. For example, studies demonstrate that, when one partner cares for and supports the other, he or she tends to believe that these feelings are reciprocated—regardless of whether they are or not. Other studies have shown that, when a loving and caring partner in a couple has a personal problem, he or she sees the other as supportive. This is true even when objective observers see no evidence of supportiveness.

Other studies have examined the specific cognitive processes that we use to distort our beliefs about our partners. For example, Lemay has shown that biased memories play a part: He had partners report their partner's responsiveness—care, positive regard and commitment—at the end of the day for seven days. They also reported their memories of their partner's responsiveness the day before. Those who were most motivated to bond with their partner on a particular day—these men and women remembered their partners as more responsive the day before. Again, these perceptions were independent of partner's actual feelings and memories of their interactions.

Other studies point to biased interpretation of situations as the source of distorted thinking. Lemay found that motivated people, when their partners are hostile or neglectful, take the blame for not disclosing their true needs and desires. This allows them to avoid the more threatening conclusion that their partners simply don't care.

So is all this cognitive trickery a bad thing? Not at all, says Lemay. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that biased perceptions can be tonic, for both individual well-being and for relationships. Those with positively biased perceptions of care report more relationship satisfaction, and they also feel and act in ways that will preserve the relationship. They are less emotionally reactive and more trusting,

and this can feed back into the relationship with positive consequences.

*Wray Herbert is reporting this week from the first International Convention of Psychological Science in Amsterdam.*