

**WHAT DO
YOU NEED
TO**
#MAKEITGOOD?

Insight Topic 11:

LOVE +

ROMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to '**About the Insight Gathering project**' also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org

1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

In the initial focus groups, the topic of **LOVE** and related themes were raised and discussed by 11 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **LOVE** online survey came from 32 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	3
Dundee	26
Perth and Kinross	3
Other area	-
Total by method	32

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	20	10	2

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	7	16	4	1	1	-	3

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the survey provided a response to the request: *Tell us about your experience of LOVE when it comes to sex or relationships.* Young people's insight extends the theme of *love* to other associated matters such as *respect, romance, feeling cared for and commitment.* Insight from young people points to several themes.

Love is a feeling

From online responses, and from focus group discussion, young people's insight highlights the importance of love as a feeling.

Love is warm and cosy. So happy. (16/PK/Female)

In particular love is associated with strong emotion, with passion.

Love is when you feel very strongly in a caring way for someone.
(16/Dundee/Other gender identity)

When you feel passionate toward someone. (>16/Dundee/Female)

If you feel passionate about someone in a relationship and really care about them. (17/Dundee/Female)

Feeling so passionately towards someone. (17/Dundee/Female)

Love is feeling so passionately about someone that you would go above and beyond for them. (16/Dundee/Female)

Love can also be directly associated with sex, either as expectation or an expression.

Q: What do other people expect from sex?

Love. (Focus group 12/Dundee)

Q: What do other people expect from sex?

To feel loved and wanted. (Focus group 5/PK)

It's like an expression of love. (Focus group 12/Dundee)

However, although young people may be having sex, they may not have experienced such feelings.

I don't know what that feels like man, I'm only 18 and aw the birds I've been with have mostly just been (*whistles*) you know – a 'blow and go' like.
(Focus group 7/PK)

In one group discussion about love and attraction young people had a bit of fun trying to explore the meaning of 'chemistry' which one of the group had identified as important:

YP 1: What even is that?

YP 2: Like when your eyes meet across a crowded room...

YP 3: ...and you get a stiffy. (Focus group 7/PK)

Love as a necessary aspect of intimate/sexual relationships

For some young people love and intimacy (or having sex) go hand-in-hand; perhaps love is something that must come before having sex. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of LOVE when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

An intimate feeling you share. (17/Dundee/Female)

I feel you should love someone before you enter a relationship. (18/PK/Male)

The person you want to sex. (16/Angus/Male)

Love is the most important thing in a relationship. If it isn't there, then there is no reason to be with that person. It is also quite important with sex. You don't need

to love someone to have sex with them but it makes the experience more intimate and special. (16/Dundee/Female)

From focus group discussion about the most important thing for a *good relationship* or for *good sex* young people said:

Q: What's the most important thing for a good relationship?

You have to both love each other. (Focus group 4/PK)

Q: What's the most important thing for good sex?

Being confident, loved, wanted and comfortable. (Focus group 5/PK)

Love in terms of loss and heartache

Love has also been discussed in terms of complex and unhappy feelings and experiences.

Complicated, can be one sided, happiness. (16/Dundee/Female)

Happy and sad times. (21+/Dundee/Female)

I had my first boyfriend from 13-16 years old and I thought we were in love but now we have broken up I now feel like I loved him and he only used me. (16/PK/Female)

Love as respect

A significant theme emerging from contributions about love has been the idea of *respect*. Respect is seen as having meaning when it is mutual and clearly expressed.

When you are in a relationship with someone you have to respect them and you have to know that they respect you. It can be so many things, like, if you know they are going out with their mates you know that they aren't gonna be telling them all the stuff about you and that. You know they are going to keep that stuff just between you. (Focus group 6/Dundee)

Aye, but they've got to give you something to respect, like if they are just pure shannin' you all the time and no wanting to have a laugh or that, then what's she deserving' your respect for? (Focus group 7/PK)

It's like, I've known people and their boyfriends or girlfriends really get them down, even though they really like them. Your relationships should make you feel good, should be positive, yeah you have to work at them, but they should work for you too. (Focus group 6/Dundee)

Love as romance, care, trust and commitment

Beyond respect, insight from young people also identifies love is associated with other positive attributes in a relationship and expressed and experienced as romance, feeling cared for, having trust (a topic with its own chapter in this insight

gathering project) and commitment. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of LOVE when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

Love is when you trust each other and don't look at anyone else.)
(16/Dundee/Female)

Caring, happiness, trust, honesty. (16/Dundee/Female)

I am married to my first love, best friend and first girlfriend. We are a strong couple who don't sleep on arguments, we make an effort to do something new often so as not to stagnate. We have a passionate sex life, we have had our ups and downs but after all we got through it. Too many people give up and that's sad to see. I love my wife and I go the extra mile to do something nice or sweet for her all the time. And I know she appreciates it all. I hope this helps someone.
:) (21+/Angus/Male)

Like everybody is different so everybody is going need different things, but you have to care about each other enough to want to make it work. You'd be pretty daft if you were just going to run away at the first sign of trouble. You have to be with each other you know through rough and smooth and all that.
(Focus group 7/PK)

Showing that you care and making time for each other. Date night is a totally lame term, but it's just making time for each other where it's the two of you, not all your mates and everyone else too. You don't really get to know each other when you are always out with friends, you need to have some alone time too.
(Focus group 8/PK)

It can be things like getting to know stuff about each other that maybe other people don't know, or having shared stuff just the two of you. Making that bond.
(Focus group 8/PK)

Commitment is like putting something in. (Focus group 11/Dundee)

You can't be in a relationship part-time. (Focus group 12/Dundee)

Q: What do you need to make a relationship good?
Someone you can grow with. (Focus group 15/Angus)

Young people's insight points to the experience of love, romance and respect being expressed in the important but small things; responding to the question *tell us about your experience of LOVE when it comes to sex or relationships* responses included:

Having safe sex. (>16/Dundee/Male)

Kisses and cuddles. Sitting on the couch, watching an episode of Family Guy, sharing a spliff. It's perfect. (Focus group 8/PK)

Waking up to a bacon roll. (16/Dundee/Male)

2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the stress which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding *love* and other associated feelings such as *romance*, *respect*, *feeling cared for* and *commitment*.

There is a wealth of research, literature and of course cultural fascination with *love*. There are various theories which discuss love, for example psychologist Robert Sternbergⁱ asks 'what does it mean to love someone' and explores **a triangular theory of love which considers intimacy, passion and commitment** (with the argument that couples need at least 2 of the 3 factors to sustain a relationship). Sternberg believed his model was 'incomplete' but provided "at least one step toward understanding the nature of love in everyday life". Psychologist Zick Rubinⁱⁱ also suggests 3 elements to love: attachment, caring and intimacy; Rubin has developed a questionnaire to empirically measure love. Young people's insight would seem to reflect the characteristics of love identified in these theories.

Collinsⁱⁱⁱ and colleagues report that relationship quality "refers to the degree to which partners manifest intimacy, affection, and nurturance". He identifies that "low-quality relationships are marked by irritation, antagonism, and notably high levels of conflict or controlling behavior" while "high-quality relationships characterized by supportiveness and intimacy are associated with measures of functioning and well-being for the individuals involved". Further, **"quality romantic relationships in adolescence are associated with increased likelihood of positive relationships and relationship commitment in early adulthood"**.

In their 2013 study 'Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century'^{iv} the Open University team explored long-term adult couple relationships. The team identify that: "Love remains a slippery concept... its articulation and meanings are hard to pin down". Despite this, the research identified that couples highlight the importance of good communication and small acts of kindness as making them feel appreciated. Extending the idea of love to companionship, care and commitment the authors state:

"Being 'best friends' with your partner ranked very highly amongst all women and men, with the trope of friendship being used to signify emotional closeness. Respect, encouragement and kindness were valued features of such relationships, together with a confidence that concerns and problems could be shared. Saying or showing love featured for all participants. Saying 'I love you' appeared to symbolise the closeness of the couple relationship and provide individual affirmation and reassurance".

In their work exploring romantic relationships in adolescence Lauren Berger^v and colleagues address many of the aspects of relationships highlighted by young people

earlier. They report that **relationship satisfaction is “related to the ability of romantic partners to communicate successfully about important life issues”**. They recognise that research into adolescent romantic relationships is sparse, this despite the fact that “young people spend a large amount of time focused on romantic relationships”. The authors identify that “sensitive, empathic communication is essential” for good quality romantic relationships. They also recognise however that when it comes to sexual aspects of their relationships the newness of romantic relationships in general can mean that “communicating about ‘how far to go’ or ‘what I’m comfortable with’ may be particularly awkward and challenging topics for young people to talk about”. Berger and colleagues confirm that young people see and use their romantic relationships “as safe havens” where they can share and seek support, so that “eventually, a romantic partner is likely to be perceived as the most supportive person in the social network”. The authors characterise some **important aspects of adolescent romantic relationships** as follows:

“In the middle or later stages of young people’s relationships with romantic partners, communication about status might also involve discussing a number of issues pertaining to the ongoing relationship: feelings about each other (e.g., ‘Are we in love?’), satisfaction with the current state of the relationship (e.g., ‘I really enjoy being with you.’), the partners’ level of commitment (e.g., ‘It’s important that we make time to see each other.’), or expectations about the future status of the relationship (e.g., ‘I could see myself marrying you.’). Like adults, young people also need to communicate a sense of where the romantic relationship falls in their social network... Obviously, the process of trying to end any relationship is often very difficult, especially when the partner wants to continue the relationship”.

There is some suggestion in the literature that the experience of love or adolescent romantic relationships has a gendered perspective. While it might be assumed that women do most of the emotional work in a relationships Marilyn Montgomery^{vi} and colleagues explored the expression and experience of being in love with a sample of US adolescents, with 82% of young women and 91% of young men at age 17 reporting that they had been in love; these relationships were understood to involve caring, affection and sexual attraction. The authors suggest that young women might be more cautious about “making emotionally and psychologically intimate commitments that are likely to have a strong impact on their personal identities”. Finally, work by Susan Sprecher^{vii} suggests that **sexual satisfaction in relationships is associated with love, commitment and stability**, this is true for both men and women although overall, sexual satisfaction had stronger links with relationship quality for men than for women.

3. LOVE + ROMANCE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources several important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted. Again, some attention is given to the use of insight from this project in terms of the use of social marketing to promote positive sexual health for young people.

Love matters with regard to sexual decision making

Working with the assumption that most sexual behaviour occurs within relationships it can be argued that the perception of *being in love* is related to choices made regarding sexual behaviour. Montgomery, quoted earlier, argues for greater attention to be paid to “adolescents perceptions of love and the salience of their early explorations of intimacy”. She believes that this adolescent understanding of love should “guide new interventions that promote broader goals of optimal psychosocial and psychosexual development” so that opportunities “for adolescents to explore interpersonal needs, relationship behaviours, and the meaning of the compelling experience of being in love... will also see an increase in the effectiveness of our intervention programmes that promote interpersonal responsibility”.

Using love, romance and associated concepts as a lens through which to focus on ‘the good relationship’

Collins and colleagues (quoted earlier) describe romantic relationships as “a hallmark of adolescence”; it is important then that we pay attention to them. Like the insight topic HAPPINESS, ideas of love, romance etc. might be seen as a positive way to engage young people in talking about their relationships. Young people also associate love with other positive concepts; trust, commitment, respect and so when considering the use of social marketing this *insight* and the *customer orientation* it provides means that communication with young people (and service provision which targets them) should be informed by the positive and aspirational aspects of young people’s personal and sexual relationships, not just worries, anxieties or deficits that can easily frame young people’s sexual health outcomes.

Promoting the benefits of communication

This insight point is also made in the chapter on the theme of COMMUNICATION. Insight from young people affirms that they understand that good communication in a relationship has benefits – you get to know each other better, understand what your partner likes and misunderstandings and arguments are avoided. However, we also know that in adolescence young people might not have the skills and confidence to talk with a partner. If young people feel that communication is difficult they need support to practice and perhaps change how they relate to a partner – in social marketing terms this points to the need to help more young people *exchange* current ways of behaving which are non-communicative and understand the benefits of behaving differently.

Love, romance and gender

Insight from other research indicates that some consideration should be given to how we think about ideas of love and romance when it comes to gender. Social marketing recognises that in terms of *segmentation* a one size fits all approach should be avoided. When it comes to using notions of love, romance or commitment as a lens through which to explore relationships, sexual choices and behaviours, the nuanced approaches that young men or young women require needs careful consideration.

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