



The Love Connection

An expert in the field of positive psychology explores the health perks of bonding—with everyone around you. *By Nicole Frehsée*

HERE'S SOME SIMPLE advice: Spread the love. Not just with your partner, family, and friends but with people you hardly know, because the more loving you are in everyday life, the healthier you could be. In her new book, *Love 2.0: How Our Supreme Emotion Affects Everything We Feel, Think, Do, and Become*, Barbara Fredrickson, PhD, suggests that true love isn't just about romance, companionship, or fondness; fundamentally, it springs from something she calls "micromoments of shared positive emotion." Fredrickson's research has found that such moments have the potential to lower our risk for disease and may even influence how our cells regenerate. We asked her to tell us more.

Q *How did you arrive at your definition of love?*

A: I look at it from the body's point of view. When the brain registers love, it triggers the release of the hormone and neurotransmitter oxytocin. This happens as long as three things occur: First, a warm feeling must be shared—say, the barista at your café comps your latte after noticing you've had a rough day. Second, your brain activity has to sync up with the other person's, as when you laugh at the same joke. Third, there's a mutual motivation to invest in each other's well-being.

Q *But can you really be invested in a stranger's well-being?*

A: Yes. Say you have a friendly chat with a

guy in line at the post office, and then you see a package fall on his foot. You'll have more concern for him than for a person you'd never connected with. It's not something we think about consciously, but these fleeting connections happen more often than we realize.

Q *If the connections are so short-lived, why should we care about them?*

A: They can help improve something called cardiac vagal tone, which reflects how much your heart rate is influenced by your breathing. It's an indication of your body's capacity to regain calm after you've been in a stressful situation. Low vagal tone has been linked to chronic inflammation throughout the body, which is a known risk factor for heart failure, stroke, and diabetes. In our research, we found that the more positive social connections people had over a nine-week period, the more their vagal tone increased.

Q *You say these micromoments of love can also change our cells. How does that work?*

A: Your emotions can trigger hormones that influence the way genes are expressed in the body. We know this happens with negative emotions: Stress releases adrenaline, which can prime cells for inflammation, causing disease. I believe that positive feelings, which can trigger the release of oxytocin, have the opposite effect and set us up for a healthier life.

Q *How can we add more micromoments to our lives?*

A: Simply get out and be more social! That's what's really promising about our research. Getting the benefits of love doesn't require being in a romantic relationship or living near family and friends. Just make sure you're connecting with others, whether it's through conversation or eye contact. We tend to trivialize these interactions, but they're just as important to your health as eating well or going for a run. **Q**