

# The Diversity of Love Journal

## A Towering Figure in the Study of Love: Obituary for Helen Fisher

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[Helen Fisher](#), one of the towering figures in the study of love, passed away on August 17, 2024, in New York, United States. She was trained as a biological anthropologist, mainly at Rutgers University, New Jersey. She used her knowledge and creativity to probe what drives humans to fall in love and often maintain such deep love in the face of adversity.

*“Nobody gets out of love alive” (Helen Fisher)*

[Helen Fisher](#) was the first to carry out (in 1996) a number of studies of romantic love using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of people’s brains. 17 men and women who had just fallen madly in love were scanned in an MRI machine. Then, their results were compared to a similar group of people who had just been dumped by a loved one, as well as to a comparable group of men and women who had been married for some twenty years. Once in the scanner, participants were shown pictures of their beloved and (separated by a distraction task) pictures of people unknown to them.

What the MRIs revealed was that the pictures of the loved ones caused an explosion of activity in the brain's ventral tegmental area (VTA), a small factory at the base of the brain that produces dopamine, and subsequently spreads it throughout other regions of the brain. While we now know that love and dopamine are linked, Helen Fisher was the first to empirically establish these relations. Given that the ventral tegmental area "lies near the primitive brain regions associated with thirst and hunger", she came to realize that "romantic love is a basic human drive." (*Anatomy of Love*, 2016, p. 39).

The amazing finding revealed that the same mechanisms, often accompanied by heartbreaking emotions, were present in all three groups, including the newly engaged, the recently dumped, and those who had already experienced twenty years of love.

Among Helen Fisher's other achievements was the personality typology that she developed to explain the roles which partners play in courtship and long-term relationships. She proposed 4 personality types of individuals – *explorers*, *builders*, *directors* and *negotiators* – and demonstrated how they act in interpersonal love relationships. She called the typology speculative, and sure it is. But it is based on her many keen observations of couples, in which men and women go about in handling their relationships. And scientifically grounded or not, it has served as a guide to so many lovers as well as to those heart-broken by love.

Helen Fisher also proposed the theory that love comes in three drives: (1) lust, (2) romantic love, and (3) long-term attachment. Any of these motivations can trigger a mating relationship, pair bonding, and parenting.

Helen Fisher had her unique playful, humorous and witty style of speaking. She frequently talked on various social media platforms. Her TED talks ([all available on YouTube](#)) often display an unusual lightheartedness with the topics she was talking about. Also, in her books she keeps the reader alert by her sharp vision of the subject she is writing about. Here are a few examples of her playful style of writing (from *Anatomy of Love*, 1992/2016):

- *Perhaps the most remarkable thing the sexes have in common is that they bother to marry at all. (p. 49)*
- *But we have whispering within. (p. 146)*
- *Male-male competition; female choice. (p. 173)*
- *Silent ovulation got the female more of what she needed – males. (p. 187)*
- *We struggle, you and I, with intimacy. (p. 208)*
- *Male dominance is a myth. (p. 220)*
- *[Our species] acquired another burden – the teenager. (p. 238)*
- *For the past 10,000 years, marriage was the beginning of a partnership, today it's the finale. (p. 306), or*
- *Nobody gets out of love alive*

(from [Helen Fisher, Anatomy of Love, 1992/ 2016](#)).

Now that she is no longer there to illuminate us, we will miss her sharp and witty wisdom. But there is some comfort: we can still read and re-read [her books](#), such as *Anatomy of Love*, *Why We Love*, *The First Sex*, *Why Him*, *Why Her*.

But, of course, the best way to honor and remember Helen Fisher is to continue scholarly thinking and research of love, the subject she dedicated her life for. The Institute of Love Studies, as an international consortium of scholars, is committed to this research task.

## References

- Fisher, H. *Anatomy of Love. A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray*. W.W. Norton, 1992/2016.
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