

# Why Love Languages Still Matter in Marriage

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Marital relationships rarely fail due to a lack of love; more often, they falter because love is experienced as absent. Couples frequently report feeling unappreciated, disconnected, or emotionally unseen—despite strong commitment and shared history. In this context, the love languages framework remains clinically relevant, not as a prescriptive formula, but as a lens through which couples can better understand emotional misalignment.

In modern marriages, emotional labour is often invisible, time is fragmented, and expectations are high. Partners may genuinely express love in ways that feel meaningful to them, yet these expressions fail to land with the other. Love languages help explain this paradox: love may be present, but it is being spoken in the “wrong dialect.”

## Overview of the Five Love Languages

The love languages framework was introduced by Gary Chapman in the 5 Love Languages. Chapman proposed that individuals tend to give and receive love primarily through one or two preferred modes. While most people appreciate all five, emotional nourishment is strongest when love is expressed in one’s primary language.

The five love languages are:

Words of Affirmation

Acts of Service

Receiving Gifts

Quality Time

Physical Touch

When mismatches occur particularly under stress, partners may feel chronically dissatisfied without understanding why.

## Words of Affirmation in Modern Marriage

Words of Affirmation involve expressing love through verbal appreciation, encouragement, and reassurance. In marriage, this language is often the first to erode, particularly in long-term relationships where appreciation is assumed rather than articulated.

Contemporary Challenges: Modern couples frequently communicate logistically rather than emotionally. Conversations revolve around schedules, finances, children, and tasks. Affirming language—compliments, gratitude, emotional validation can become rare. For partners whose primary language is Words of Affirmation, silence may be experienced as rejection. A lack of verbal acknowledgment can trigger insecurity, resentment, or emotional withdrawal, particularly when coupled with anxious attachment patterns.

Clinical Insight: In counselling, these partners often report feeling “taken for granted.” Encouraging intentional verbal expression, without framing it as weakness, can significantly improve emotional safety and relational satisfaction.

### **Acts of Service and the Mental Load of Marriage**

Acts of Service involve expressing love through helpful actions. In modern marriages, this language intersects powerfully with the concept of the mental load, the often unseen, planning and responsibility carried by one partner.

Contemporary Challenges: Acts of Service can easily become transactional or expected, especially in households with children or dual careers. What once felt loving can become obligatory, leading to burnout and resentment. When Acts of Service are one partner’s primary love language, a perceived imbalance in effort can deeply undermine emotional connection. Conversely, partners who do not value this language may underestimate its emotional significance.

Clinical Insight: Counsellors can help couples differentiate between doing tasks and communicating care. Acts of Service regain meaning when they are voluntary, acknowledged, and aligned with the partner’s emotional needs—not merely household survival.

### **Receiving Gifts in an Experience-Driven Culture**

Receiving Gifts is often misunderstood as materialistic. In reality, this love language is about symbolic meaning—being remembered, considered, and prioritised.

Contemporary Challenges: In modern marriages, gift-giving may be reduced to birthdays and holidays, often outsourced or rushed. Digital reminders and online shopping can strip gifts of emotional intentionality. Partners who value Receiving Gifts may feel invisible when gestures are forgotten or minimised. This can be particularly painful in marriages where emotional expression is already limited.

Clinical Insight: Therapeutic work often reframes gift-giving as emotional representation rather than financial expenditure. Small, thoughtful gestures—notes, shared memories, symbolic items—can restore emotional resonance. Quality Time in a Distracted World; Quality Time involves focused attention and shared presence. In contemporary marriages, this love language is increasingly threatened by technology, work demands, and parental roles.

Contemporary Challenges: Couples may spend significant time together physically while remaining emotionally disconnected. Screens, multitasking, and chronic exhaustion dilute presence. For partners whose primary language is Quality Time, this can feel like emotional abandonment. Quality Time is often the first casualty of stress, yet its absence intensifies relational dissatisfaction.

Clinical Insight: Counsellors can help couples redefine Quality Time as attuned presence, not quantity. Even brief, intentional connection—free from distraction—can significantly improve relational security.

### **Physical Touch Beyond Sexual Intimacy**

Physical Touch includes affectionate, non-sexual contact as well as sexual intimacy. In long-term marriages, touch often becomes either functional or sexualised, losing its emotional grounding.

Contemporary Challenges: Stress, parenting, health issues, and unresolved conflict can significantly reduce physical affection. For partners whose love language is Physical Touch, this reduction can be experienced as rejection or emotional abandonment. Importantly, Physical Touch is closely linked to attachment regulation and nervous system soothing.

Clinical Insight: Counselling work often focuses on restoring safe, non-pressured touch. This may involve rebuilding trust, addressing consent, and separating affection from obligation.

A Modern Attachment-Informed Perspective; While Chapman's framework is accessible, its clinical depth increases when integrated with attachment theory. Love languages often represent how attachment needs are expressed. For example: Anxious attachment may amplify the need for Words of Affirmation or Quality Time. Avoidant attachment may rely more on Acts of Service while resisting verbal or physical intimacy

In marriage, attachment injuries, betrayal, neglect, emotional unavailability, can distort love language expression. Partners may withhold their language as protection or demand it as reassurance. Understanding this dynamic allows counsellors to move beyond surface behaviours and address underlying emotional safety.

However, caution is required. Love languages should not be used rigidly or as a scorecard. The goal is mutual understanding, not performance.

In modern marriage (relationships), love is rarely absent, but it is often miscommunicated. The love languages framework remains relevant because it highlights a central relational truth: feeling loved is not about effort alone, but about attunement. When couples learn to express love in ways that are emotionally meaningful to their partner—and understand the deeper attachment needs beneath those expressions—relationships shift from cycles of frustration to patterns of connection.

For counselling professionals, love languages are not a solution in themselves, but a powerful doorway into deeper relational work, one that honours both individuality and intimacy in the evolving landscape of modern marriage.