

(Self) Love happens when you expect it by Miracle Idowu

Thirteen. The beginning of teenagehood. For some, it marks the start of partial independence. It also marks the slew of self-critique and self-doubt that come with it. Suddenly, I am more aware of my skin, my voice, and my body and others are aware of it too. Thirteen also marked the start of my first “relationship.” Relationship is a word I use lightly, since it lasted less than 24 hours. Nonetheless, it was still a relationship. This was a new experience for me. I didn’t know what to expect. My concept of love was restricted to what I saw in television and film. My parents were not outwardly romantic toward each other. There were many moments when they were cold to each other. I sometimes questioned whether they were a good fit. Between this and television/film, this is what I thought love was: a mix between passionately fighting for the person you loved while also being distant. I never once thought that love could be still and calm. In turn, this shaped how I perceived myself and my journey with self-love. I thought that loving myself had to be the same way: difficult. While the journey there was difficult, the act itself doesn’t have to be painful. It shouldn’t be.

Now, back to the relationship. As mentioned before, the majority of my ideas of love came from television and film. While the stories themselves were poignant, there was one thing I noticed in most of them: they were white (at least the leads were). It was hard for me to imagine that someone like me, a dark-skinned girl, could ever receive the love these films showed. So when the opportunity presented itself, I went for it. I thought this would be the only chance I could ever receive love.

Well, in the short time I was in the relationship, I was pressured to show my body. I was used and only wanted for what I had on the outside. Was love supposed to feel like this? How am

I supposed to know if this love is right if I have nothing to compare it to? Even after the relationship ended, he spread rumors about me and my body. I felt looks from people I didn't even know. My self-love, which had already been fragile, was now worse than ever.

The journey to my self-love has not been easy, and it is far from over. It will continue to be ongoing. I had to first address my mindset. I had all-or-nothing thinking. I believed if I couldn't love myself now, it would never happen. Instead of thinking in extremes, I took it one day at a time. I first addressed the cause of my lack of self-love: the people I surrounded myself with. The people we hang out with and their values are typically indicative of our own values. I surrounded myself with people whose values were negative and surface-level, which in turn reflected in my own values and the way I perceived myself. When I surrounded myself with people who would hate on others and themselves, I started to do the same. I critiqued myself and disguised it as self-reflection. At first, I thought I was cool to finally be part of the group. Slowly, I realized it just made me unhappy. I became the thing I disliked the most. As I slowly cut off ties with them, I found people who cared for themselves and each other. They inspired me. They taught me the power of "No". They helped me realize that I do not have to sacrifice my own growth to make others comfortable.

Self-love has been a topic of discussion since the beginning of time but has seen a surge since the invention of the digital age. This new discussion seems to revolve around the idea that "we are all that we have" and "no one owes us anything." While self-love starts with looking from within, to sustain it, the communities we surround ourselves with are critical.

During this time, I turned to TeenLine, an anonymous hotline that provides mental health support for youth. I felt alone, and the hotline helped me realize my worth. From there, it was

really the little daily things that made the difference. Journaling, self-affirmations, and even having solo dance parties, yes, really dancing by yourself, all made me more confident. They helped me realize that I am a person too and that I deserve happiness.

I never really knew what self-love was. I thought it was a vanity thing, related only to how you physically looked, never internal. While self-love does involve loving your physical features, it is so much more than that. It's making a conscious effort to choose yourself, to remind yourself that despite your flaws, you are worthy of your own love.

Self-love works on two levels: the internal, where I remind myself of my worth, my value, and my right to happiness, and the external, where I appreciate the body I inhabit and treat it with the kindness it deserves. Taking up hobbies helped me to work on both. This year, I made a promise to myself: I will run. I had tried before but never followed through, always doubting whether I was capable. Instead of thinking, "If I can't run a mile, I can't run at all," I reframed it to, "Just run for ten minutes, and go from there." That small shift made the difference. I stuck with it, and now, I am training to run my first half marathon this December, maybe even run my first marathon next year.

As bell hooks, feminist icon wrote in her book *All About Love*, said, "Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action." [side note: the intentional spelling of bell hooks in lowercase reflects her wanting to shift the spotlight from her individuality to her ideas] Reading this book redefined what I thought about love. It reframed love as a conscious decision. Instead of waiting for love to come to me, I made and continue to make the daily choice of choosing it for myself.

Resources

TeenLine: provides support, resources, and hope to youth through a hotline of professionally trained teen counselors, and works to de-stigmatize and normalize mental health through outreach programs.

Link: <https://www.teenline.org/>

All About Love: New Visions by bell hooks is a book that examines love as a deliberate action not as a general feeling. It requires intention, will, and choice.

Link: <https://www.amazon.com/All-About-Love-Visions-Paperback/dp/0060959479>