Getting it together

We need to show we need unconditional love

By BOB TRENZ, Ph.D.

Everybody knows how important it is for a baby to feel loved. We've heard and read and seen how crucial love is to an infant's sense of well-being, to his physical health, and to his willingness to meet life's challenges.

When a child feels loved without reservation, he feels accepted and loved for who he is inside. Not just when he is good or competent or quiet. And that has an effect that is both powerfully calming and encouraging and inspirational. It eases the discomfort of frustrations and fosters the confidence and bravery that a child needs as he clumsily walks toward his adulthood.

Everybody knows that. But how many know that these same principles apply to us grown-ups? No matter how old we are, when we feel authentically and unconditionally loved by another human being we are comforted and inspired.

EVEN THOUGH our adult pains may be more overwhelming than a wet diaper, this kind of love-you-no-matter-what caring helps us to realize calmly that we'll be okay, that our personal resources will be enough to meet the challenges of our life. It fosters a confidence that we can expect, even count on, success in our pursuit of personal happiness.

Even a small dose of this kind of love helps to relieve feelings of discouragement and intimidation when troublesome circumstances seem to be too much for us.

For me, this is much more than just a nice-sounding theory. I see the proof of it daily. I've seen counseling clients discover vast new personal resources when they have been helped to feel truly lovable. I've learned it from married couples who have been able to overcome huge incompatibilities once they've succeeded in producing a steady flow of unconditional love feelings.

And I've seen complicated work problems, health problems, and financial problems untangled with surprising ease by men and women who were fortified with the calm and clarity of thought that comes from this powerful state of mind.

YET, KNOWING this, I'm more than a little amazed at how little of this precious gift we have in our adult lives. It's so rare, in fact, that most of us have learned to think of it as an unreachable ideal. We've even gone so far as to believe that being grown-up means being able to live without unconditional, motherly love.

And that's one of the foremost reasons that we don't have a lot more of it. If we knew that we could expect a constant supply, in marriage, in our jobs, and in our friendships, then we would naturally demand it and work for it.

Instead, we have learned to live without it. We idolize rugged individualism. We look for love in substitutes like food and tobacco and alcohol. We console ourselves with career achievements and material possessions. We seek artificial love-environments like daily psychotherapy and extramarital affairs. Adn we lose ourselves in the romantic fantasies painted on our one-true-friend: the television.

Becoming ever-greater experts on living without love, we protect ourselves from the thing we have learned to fear: vulnerability. We desperatiely keep up our defenses, even though they keep us from the very love that we need so much, because we believe we need their protection.

In fact, all of the obstacles between us and being loved can be summarized by this one fear, the fear of being defenseless and exposed, of being vulnerable to the dangers of human relationships.

AS MUCH AS we need and want love, we are afraid.

We want acceptance but we are too scared of being rejected to drop our public facades and make ourselves transparent. So lonely husbands maintain their strong, stoic image instead of letting their wives see the shy, needy little boy who lives inside. Overwhelmed parents keep up their wise, competent front for fear of letting their kids see their humanness.

We want someone to take care of us, but we are afraid to trust anyone enough to give them that much influence over our lives. We are afraid of the hidden conditions in unconditional love. If I let you know how much I need you, will you use it against me?

Dreading the pain of disappointment, we try not to admit how much we really want to be loved. We opt for the dull ache of lonely cynicism instead of risking the sharp pain of frustrated hopes.

And, even if we admit our need for love, we fear that we don't deserve it. We look at love with awe. Its mystique claims that only very mature, capable, "together" human beings can succeed as lovers. Love is seen as a kind of Nobel Prize for excellent humanness. And so it's out of reach for imperfect people. To try it is to risk a personal failure with high stakes.

IRONICALLY, the only thing that makes these fears real is our belief in them. Because of our defenses and images we are not knowable and are therefore bound to fail in our search for love. Because of our cynicism and lack of trust, we build protections which bring about the very disappointments that we feared.

But if fear is the biggest obstacle to feeling really loved, then it must be obvious that courage and faith are love's allies. If you want to be loved, you've got to replace fear with trust.

Like the child who smiles at a world that could easily overhwelm his underdeveloped abilities, the seeker of love must have the courage to let go of his protective supports and move towards the loving mothers in all of us.

Bob Trenz is a psychologist and marriage counselor in Rochester. Questions for Dr. Trenz may be sent to P.O. Box 64, Rochester 48063.

Babies start early to think and learn

Drink, sleep, wet, cry and coo—that should be enough to expect of anybody who's only 4 months old.

But research at the University of Michigan indicates that infants also do a considerable amount of thinking and learning during this early stage. They even remember things.

"Infants have a natural interest in things which are new and novel," U-M psychology professor Gary Olson explains. "We can test their memory simply by showing them something unfamiliar and something they have already seen before and noting which draws their attention."

Olson has conducted memory tests with close to 1,000 infants during the past four years. In his current project, the young subjects, propped up comfortably in an infant seat, are shown a slide of a face or an object. After a period of time, the same slide and a new slide are shown simultaneously.

"ON THE SECOND showing, the child tends to be more attracted to the unfamiliar slide," Olson reports. "This 'novelty preference,' as we call it, indicates that the infant does remember the first slide. We have seen evidence of this after periods of 15 minutes and even 24 hours."

Olson and other researchers believe that between 3 and 6 months of age, the infant learns to discriminate among familiar and unfamiliar faces. It follows then, during the next six months, that the infant develops a wariness toward strange persons.

This may not be news to a majority of mothers, but it was, 18 years ago, to many in the scientific community. "As recently as the early 1960s, infants were believed to be relatively insensitive to the world around them," Olson says.

"Now there is a growing recognition that infancy is an important period in the development of the mind and the nervous system. Even the earliest experiences of the newborn may have an impact on shaping his personality and intellect."

THE U-M research focuses on a very primitive, universal form of learning: the process of seeing (or doing) something over and over until one loses interest in it.

As people mature, however, the learning process becomes more complex and is affected by such factors as motivation and goals. "Thus, an adult may repeat a task many times over a period of years without becoming disinterested," Olson explains.

The U-M psychologist is broadly interested in how language is acquired and how the mind processes information in general. The research on the mental skills of pre-linguistic infants, he feels, lays the foundation for his future studies.

"The study of cognitive development from the perspective of memory development has scarcely begun," Olson says.