

# SESSION 1: What is Love?

## WELCOME

Welcome to this course on realizing a life of love! It's wonderful to be with you!

I designed this course to help you realize a life of love.

- Love is the most fulfilling of all human activities.
- Love sustains us.
- Love buffers the hardships of life.
- And love brings us the greatest peace and joy.

Love is essential, but it's also challenging, because it's a skill that can both be simple and complex. We have all experienced the challenges of loving and being loved, including:

- frustration
- confusion,
- conflicting emotions
- loneliness
- hurt
- and even heartbreak.

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Because loving can seem mysterious and subtle, it can take a lifetime to become a master at loving.

Unfortunately, most of us didn't grow up with ideal loving parents in ideal loving families. Most of us experienced some degree of trauma and neglect that left us feeling unlovable and challenged in our capacity to love and be loved. We entered adulthood with a Love Wound.

Fortunately, there's hope, no matter how hopeless you might feel about love. The love wound can be healed, and loving can be learned through a variety of practices. That's what the WellMind community is about. The WellMind Community is a supportive, healing community designed to help you rediscover and develop your sense of your lovability. It's designed to guide you in skillfully loving and being loved. We do this through the practice of the WellMind Method.

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## The WellMind Method

The WellMind method is the practice of the 3 A's of Awakening to love.

**The 3 A's are attending, appreciating, and acting with love.** While the 3 A's may sound simple, the practice of the 3 A's can be profound. Through the practice of the 3 A's, you will heal your love wound and realize a life of love.

In our sessions together, we'll explore love and its benefits.

- We'll talk about the love wound.
- We'll study the 3 A's and how to apply them to our lives.
- I'll also share with you many heart-mind practices for cultivating reverence.
- For acting with love, we'll study in detail 31 different love practices.
- By the time you finish this course, you will be well on your way to realizing a life of love.

If you have a severe love wound, you might want to consider combining this course with psychotherapy to help you heal.

If you have a moderate or mild love wound, this course will help you to heal and grow.

If you don't have a love wound, this course will still help you to grow and transcend the limitations and suffering of the ego.

If you are new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the (previous sessions/first ten sessions), for they make up the core foundation upon which the rest of the course is built. You'll need this foundation to benefit from the remaining sessions.

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## Let's Get Started!

For our first session, let's talk about what is love?

To begin, **love is essential.**

It's our deepest desire—even deeper than our desires for survival or comfort. It's our true nature, and we're born hard-wired to both give and receive it. Love is as critical as air, water, and food. We know its power because infants who are deprived of it quickly waste away and die.

**Love is woven into the very fabric of creation.** It's everywhere, surrounding and enveloping us through the phenomenon of grace. Even in the darkest of times, we can find a light of love, healing, and hope. There would be no Life without love, and there would be no love without Life. Love is simply the most powerful force for change in the world.

We come into this world as separate beings with a longing for connection and union, and it's through love that we realize this union. **Love helps us savor this precious gift of existence** just as it is, even as it inspires us to create an even better world.

We all share a calling to love the whole world, one person at a time. Our small acts of love can change the balance of love in the world, as **our love resonates beyond the lives we touch to the entire web of creation.**

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**While love is good for the spirit, it's also good for the body.** People in loving long-term relationships have been found to have better physical health, fewer doctor visits, shorter than average hospital stays, and greater longevity. Love promotes positive emotions like happiness and peace, which in turn boost the immune system and reduce our risk of infection. In one study, people in happy, loving relationships experienced faster healing of blister wounds than people in unloving relationships.

Since satisfying relationships provide support, happily married people have lower blood pressure, fewer headaches, less pain, lower rates of cardiac illness and strokes, and a better ability to endure stress. In fact, a study has shown that people in happy marriages may have a higher ten-year survival rate after heart bypass surgery.

**Love is a buffer against loneliness**, which is associated with increased mortality. Married people live longer in part because they're more likely to feel loved. People with close connections to friends, family, and neighbors also have a greater chance of living a long, healthy life. They even look younger than people who lack love in their lives.

Physical affection and a close connection with others release oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding that lowers stress hormones. This in turn reduces blood pressure, improves mood, and increases our tolerance for pain. Hugs result in lower blood pressure and pulse, as well as smaller rises in blood pressure under stress. Expressing love through sexual intimacy lowers our stress levels and leads to a greater sense of well-being and general health.

Love creates the conditions for moments of ecstasy by helping us drop our resentments, harsh judgments, and unfounded fears. It helps us to anticipate, accept, and even appreciate the many difficulties and hardships of Life as an essential part of the journey.

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**Love inspires joy, energy, and action** as it restores our spirituality—our joyfully reverent and harmonious relationship with Reality. There's no question that people in loving relationships experience more happiness and joy. We know, for example, that the quality of our relationships is more important than money in determining happiness.

Love gives us the courage and determination to do what we know to be right, even if it's uncomfortable. It lights the way for change by giving us a vision of what's true, right, and good. Then, it gives us the courage and inspiration to follow that path.

In simple terms, **loving ourselves and loving others feels good**, while hatred and apathy leave us with a bitter, empty feeling. We all depend upon one another, so we have the responsibility and privilege of caring for each other. When we fulfill this calling, fulfillment is our reward. In short, to give our lives over to love is to save our lives.

We're all born with an innate sense of our own goodness, the goodness of others, and the goodness of Life. We also have a capacity to learn to love through countless loving interactions with our caregivers. If this goes well, we grow into people who learn how to translate the basic urge to benefit others into skillful action. Our Life agenda becomes to contribute to the world from a feeling of abundance.

But in order to do that, we must learn from those who are skilled at loving, just as we learn to speak well from those who are skilled at speaking. We must learn from our parents or caregivers how to be generous, compassionate, and forgiving, and we can only learn how to be in healthy relationships by watching the adults around us act in a healthy way in their relationships.

When we're loved and we love safely and effectively, we feel two things at the same time. First, we feel good, whole, and complete as individuals. Second, we feel good, whole, and complete as part of a couple or group. That group could consist of family, friends, or the community.

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### What Love Is and What It Is *Not*

**Love is one of the most confused and misused words in any language.** Most people use it to describe an intense liking or affection for someone or something, like their partner, pet, chocolate, or golf, for example. The feeling of intense affection may go along with love, but it isn't love.

We often think of it as a feeling, but it isn't that either. We might experience feelings of deep affection for those we love, but the true test is when we care for people who upset, frustrate, hurt, scare, or anger us. This doesn't mean that love requires we allow others to hurt us. Self-love dictates that we protect ourselves against harm. But love for others also dictates that we protect others from harm, even if we feel angry toward them.

**So in its essence, love is not harming.** Of course, there's a difference between pain and harm, so love is still sometimes painful. Someone may set a loving limit on you, for example, asking you to clean up after yourself or pay your share of the rent. They might refuse to do for you what you should do for yourself. They might not protect you from the natural negative consequences of your unskillful behavior, as in an addiction. They may share with you painful truths that you need to know. These are actually loving actions, even though they can be painful for you as the recipient.

**Love is also not the same as “being in love.”** Falling in love is Nature's way of getting us to invest in an attachment to another person so that we procreate and pass on our DNA. It's a form of temporary, ecstatic psychosis, in which we're blissfully blind to the flaws and faults of the other person. But that kind of love is a temporary state, so it inevitably passes away. Then, we're left with disappointment and disillusionment when we see the loved one realistically. Once we've passed through the falling in love phase, we hopefully find ourselves in a relationship with someone we like and respect and who likes and respects us in return. Then, we can engage in the practice of loving one another.

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Love is interdependency, not dependency. While we need the love of others to flourish, we don't depend solely on others for our happiness and well-being, nor do we expect or allow others to depend solely on us for their happiness and well-being. When we love, we encourage the independence and free will of others. We want them to realize their full potential, even if it isn't pleasant for us.

**In true love, we're free.** We neither possess someone else, nor are we possessed by them. We don't depend solely on others for our self-love, though we borrow the love of others in times of trouble. By not depending upon them for our self-love, we set others free to love us or not as they choose.

Love is not attachment, but we may feel our hobbies, money, power, pets, or certain people in our lives to be an extension of us. This kind of attachment is called "cathexis." When we fall in love with a partner, we cathect to them, which is natural and normal. Cathexis creates the conditions for us to practice love, but it isn't love. Instead, love transcends cathexis. When we love, we invest our energies to benefit another, but we don't invest our identity in another.

**Love also isn't self-sacrifice.** If you do something for someone out of love for them, you do it because it satisfies you, even if it causes you hardship. In the extreme, you may give your life for someone you love, but you do so freely and willingly because you see it as best for everyone, including yourself. Love sees that "me" is part of "we."

But we don't sacrifice our long-term well-being if it will harm our capacity to love. While we may experience the distress of staying up all night with someone who's ill, we find a way to recuperate so that we can continue to be there for all our loved ones. When we love, we put others first while tending to our own vitality.

We choose to love because it feels good. In this way, love is both selfless and selfish at the same time. No one who freely chooses to love is a victim. When we love, we love ourselves and others equally.



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Most importantly, love is an **attitude** that inspires **action** to enhance Life. The attitude of love is one of reverence for Life. This attitude is steady, unchanging, and unconditional, unlike feelings that come and go. It arises out of our spirituality like the deep, still sea beneath the stormy surface of emotions that constantly change. So we might dislike someone intensely, but out of our reverence for Life, we still do what's best for them.

Imagine you have a child who's misbehaving, and you're angry. You don't send him out the door and tell him to find another place to live. Instead, despite your anger, you take care of him. That's love.

Your attitude of reverence and respect springs from your spiritual vitality. If you're spiritually healthy, you have the capacity to savor this gift of conscious existence. You experience wonder and awe, and you see ordinary Life as an extraordinary, deeply profound miracle. You experience yourself to be part of something greater that you live to serve, and you appreciate the simple joy of being as you feel your connectedness to all that is.

This spiritually healthy attitude is worshipful, humble, and filled with appreciation for the sacredness of all that is. It's deeper than feelings, which come and go, and it persists through pleasure or pain. Your reverence is enduring and consistent, even when you don't feel particularly loving, so it reflects an unconditional commitment to Life. You experience your interdependence, recognizing that you're part of a greater whole as you feel inspired to serve that whole. You see that the Universe is rigged in your favor, and you acknowledge the loving, intelligent forces that brought into existence the loving, intelligent beings that we are. The attitude of love allows you to see that while those who harm you or harm others have a Love Wound, they still merit your reverence and respect.

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Of course, cultivating an attitude of universal reverence and respect can be difficult, especially if you've suffered great harm at the hands of others. For this reason, the attitude of love as universal reverence and respect is an ideal that's a lifelong spiritual practice.

As you further develop your attitude of love, you will naturally be inspired to action that is loving, both toward yourself and others. But in order to do that, most of us require healing of the Love Wound we've experienced throughout our lives.

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## What to Expect During this Course

The purpose of this course is to ease your pain and foster your joy through the skillful practice of loving. Science and common experience both confirm that loving people who are loved by other loving people have happier, more fulfilling lives. I have already experienced the difference in my own Life, and it's what I want for you.

If you were well-loved in your childhood home, you likely learned how to love well. Unfortunately, few of us grow up in ideal, loving families. Furthermore, we live in a fragmented and wounding society that equates our value with our traits and achievements, while depriving many of us of connection and belonging to a community. To some degree, we have all been wounded and have wounded others.

My career in psychiatry has brought me face to face with the widespread reality of trauma in the form of abuse, neglect, social injustice, poverty, and crime. I have learned that trauma, which is an epidemic in our society, is the source of antisocial personality disorders and criminality in my patients. The trauma we experience can damage our capacity to safely and effectively love and be loved. It causes Love Wounds in both giving and receiving, which is especially true when we experience neglect or abuse as young children.

Even if you haven't suffered significant trauma, like all of us, you still have to manage your ego. Since the ego is self-concerned and always about "me," you could call it your "meego." It seeks sensual gratification and security over spiritual fulfillment—a mind system concerned with your safety, comfort, satisfaction, and the passing on of your DNA. It's necessary for survival, of course, but it also comes at a cost of suffering and separation from others. It causes frustration when we don't get what we want and pain when we experience something we don't want. It regards others as either a threat or a source of self-benefit, so it's narrow in its pursuit of love.

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In the end, an ego-dominated Life may be periodically gratifying, but never fulfilling. Only love provides true fulfillment because we become part of one interdependent web of Life. The challenge is learning how to be both separate from others and one with others at the same time—to be both autonomous and interdependent. The practice of love as described in this course will help you meet that challenge.

So this course is not only about healing from trauma through the practice of love, but healing from the painful experience of ego-driven behavior through the practice of love. It's a course about healing, growth, and transcendence through the practice of loving.

If you're already reasonably happy and consider yourself to be a loving person, the practices on these pages will further multiply your experience of joy. We can each make the world a better place by becoming more loving people. As you heal yourself, you will heal the world, and as you heal the world, you will heal yourself.

*How to Love* is structured with an important discussion about what love truly is and what it is not. At the end of that chapter, you will take a Love Skills Assessment to help you determine where you are right now in terms of your Love Wound.

The remainder of the course consists of contemplative and behavioral practices to enhance an abiding sense of reverence and the capacity to love skillfully. Each of these practices will help you become more aware of what holds you back from loving yourself, loving others, and receiving love from yourself and others.

**Mastering the art of loving is a lifetime practice. May this course help you to become a great artist of love!**

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In our next session I'll share a bit about my own love wound and the healing of my love wound. This will allow you to get to know me and hopefully will help you to begin to feel safe sharing a bit about yourself with the WellMind community. In the meantime, between now and then, reflect on the following:

1. What does love mean to you?
2. How do you experience love in your life?
3. How do you give love to yourself?
4. How do you give love to others?

**Please take some time to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!**

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