



Three Little Words

By Lisa Daily



Recently a woman wrote to me about her boyfriend. She said he was sweet, loving, thoughtful, the perfect guy for her in every way. He brought flowers, called her a couple times a day, rubbed her back when they watched movies, and brought her alphabet soup and Meg Ryan flicks when she had the flu.

In fact, not even a night spent on the bathroom floor or a week in the same ratty flannel pajamas seemed to detract him in the least. She felt adored, cherished and cared for. There was just one tiny little thing: After a year of dating, he had never told her he loved her.

Do actions speak louder than words? We'd all like to have the fully loaded love package complete with fabulous sex, total trust, compatible taste in restaurants and movies, and a deep spiritual connection. In an either/or situation, most people would rather be with someone who shows them love every day with gestures of kindness and affection than with a person

who says "I love you, baby" at every juncture and then puts the moves on their best friend the minute they're out of earshot.

How important are those three little words? April Masini, better known as "The New Millennium's Dear Abby" says, "The first thing that mothers and fathers say to their babies, usually at birth, is 'I love you.' For the next year those are probably the most repeated words that any baby hears. It's no wonder that these imprinted words offer the promise of soothing, unconditional love and comfort to adults."

Some research suggests that men know whether or not they're going to fall in love with someone fairly quickly--usually after about three dates, while women take a bit longer, reserving judgment until the 14th date. Hardly anyone expects to hear the three magic words after just a few weeks, but generally, by the two-month mark at least one partner has begun to think about the 'L' word, and by six months, both partners have likely given the matter some thought. (Which could explain why most breakups occur at the three to five month mark: "Um, I've been thinking about whether or not I love you, and I don't.")

This seems to be just about the time when the couple starts feeling a little pressure to either say it (usually men) or hear it (usually women.) By the one-year mark, nearly everybody feels under the love gun, and even if all other areas of the relationship are going well, the mere absence of those three little words can gnaw away at a relationship like some sort of romance-eating bacteria.

And if it only takes a few weeks or months before you feel it, why does it sometimes take forever to say it? According to Dr. Erik Fisher and Steve Sharp, authors of *The Art of Managing Everyday Conflict*, "The reason people withhold is to not appear weak. Men are more commonly socialized to view love as a weakness or a trap. So they may act flippantly or sarcastically when they really love someone instead of risking the appearance of weakness."

The authors also say, "If someone says they love us, we may believe that we owe them something in return. Or, if I share these words with someone, I may feel that I now owe them a commitment."

So maybe it hits you on the seventh date that you have, indeed, fallen in love, and you decide to take the plunge and share your feelings.

According to Masini, "Once the words are spoken, the speaker is going to be waiting to see if the silent one will say it back. This will go on until it's said--or the anxiety and discomfort between you gets so focused on whether the one who says it has too many expectations or the one who doesn't say it isn't truly committed."

And, whether it was in the third grade under the disco ball at the Rollerama or just last week, most of us have experienced that oh-so-horrifying moment when we finally gather up the nerve and tell someone we love them, only to hear the response, ".Uh, thanks."

Other than the obvious, "I love you too," Masini says there are a number of appropriate responses if you're not quite sure what to do:

1. Say nothing and smile, appreciatively.
2. Say, "I wasn't expecting that, but I'm delighted. I hope you can give me a little time to sort my own feelings out as clearly as you have."
3. Say, "I don't know if I feel the same way."

If you're the one who offers up your heart (and those three little words,) and your one-and-only is still not saying he/she loves you back three-to-six months after you first say it, Masini suggests, "you take your love elsewhere."

Only you can decide if saying "I love you" is the most important aspect of your relationship, the least important, or somewhere in between. And while there are commonalities regarding what many people believe about how a relationship should progress, the truth is, every couple is different.

Barbara Wright Abernathy, author of *Venus On Top* offers this final bit of wisdom: "My husband says 'I love you' nearly every day, but the three little words that really turn me on are when he says, 'Honey, you're right.'"

Dating Expert Lisa Daily is the author of Stop Getting Dumped!

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