

## 7. Love Drugs

Romantic love has long been considered an emotional experience that arises in mysterious and unpredictable ways between people who are attracted to one another naturally. It can be overwhelming, fleeting, star-crossed, or long-lasting—but we typically think of it as outside of our control. What if we could control it?

In the United States, approximately 40% to 50% of marriages end in divorce.<sup>1</sup> With new scientific interventions, we may be able to reduce this number by increasing or prolonging feelings of love. “We treat depression, anxiety and other emotion-based responses with drugs. If love isn’t working for us, why not add a chemical?” asks Rich Wordsworth.<sup>2</sup> Current research shows that oxytocin is key to the experience of love. MDMA, various psychedelics, and some pharmaceutical drugs all prompt release of oxytocin and so also have an influence on the initiation and persistence of feelings of attraction and love.<sup>3</sup> There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that these substances are linked with increased bonding that happens more quickly than usual and lasts beyond the chemicals, thereby potentially deepening and strengthening romantic relationships. However, in other cases, the use of such substances gives a false sense of love so that when a person is not taking it anymore, the feelings of love disappear, which can lead to unexpected emotional separation and pain.<sup>4</sup>

Other substances have been linked with deadening the experience of love. SSRIs are commonly used to treat depression and anxiety, but some of them have side effects that include blunting a person’s ability to connect with others emotionally as well as sexual dysfunction. If this line of research were extended, we could imagine using substances to manipulate who and how people love, either willingly or unwillingly.<sup>5</sup>

So-called love drugs could help strengthen or stabilize long-term relationships; they could help people get over difficult break-ups; or they could help individuals to leave abusive relationships.<sup>6</sup> As scientists continue to study the effects of chemicals on love, significant ethical concerns arise. Under ordinary circumstances, we use emotion as our guide. But if we can change our emotions, then how do we know when we should? Is there anything wrong with using an artificial or external stimulation for love if participants are willing? Would the resulting relationship be in some way less real or authentic as a result?

### STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What, if anything, makes loving relationships (including romantic relationships) valuable or important? How, if at all, would “love drugs” add to or detract from that value or importance?
2. What does it mean for a feeling or relationship to be authentic? Would love drugs make the resulting feelings or relationships less authentic? Why or why not?
3. What are the morally relevant similarities and differences between using some chemical help to end the pain of romantic heartbreak and using chemical help to strengthen one’s romantic feelings toward another?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs>

<sup>3</sup> <https://qz.com/953217/love-drugs-will-soon-be-a-reality-but-should-we-take-them/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs> and <https://qz.com/953217/love-drugs-will-soon-be-a-reality-but-should-we-take-them/>