

Part 1

The Experience of Developing and Living Without Love



When we think about love, we often reflect on warmth, connection, mutual respect, and the soft glow of being recognised and held by another. But love does not appear out of nowhere. It requires a kind of relational ground – an atmosphere where safety, attunement, and emotional presence can take root and grow. Without that ground, love struggles to form.

In relational therapy, close attention is paid to the relationship that develops between therapist and client. This invisible space between them will largely be formed by the relational experiences that each has experienced.

It is in this space that the dance of making contact (with each other) takes place. This might include the reaching out, the allowing or defending, the engaging or withdrawing, the void left longing. This is where *presence* is offered or missed, where a meaningful connection is co-created or left suspended. These relational patterns will show up in therapy as they do in every other relationship.

Imagine that space between the parent and child was infused with emotional absence or interrupted by patterns of mis-attunement - a child must adjust. Those adjustments shape how we understand ourselves, and how we later relate openly and willingly, or withdraw and become invisible in relationships.

This part of the book explores how living without love is often not marked by one dramatic moment. Instead, it emerges from a persistent atmosphere of emotional absence.

Through Jessie's story, we examine how this atmosphere becomes internalised: how it shows up in thoughts, behaviours, attachment patterns, and even in the tissues of the body. We begin by naming the absence. And in doing so, we start to reclaim the possibility of presence.

Chapter 1

Love Is Essential



When Jessie was small, she understood that something was missing. Things didn't feel right to her - people around her were not happy, not well connected, often abrupt or harsh, distracted. She couldn't find a way to connect without risking a disruption of some kind - an irritation, a flare of temper, a sharp command.

So, she tried to make things better.

She brought drawings and little gifts.

She tidied her toys, made her bed, kept her room pristine without being asked.

She became quiet when tensions rose.

Nothing seemed to help.

She wasn't too young to name it. To her, it was clear: *love was missing*.

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One night, curled against the hallway wall after being sent to her room again for asking too many questions, Jessie's small body began to understand what her mind couldn't yet articulate: *no one was coming*. Her crying faded - not because she felt soothed, but because she began withdrawing her presence in order to survive a longing no one was going to meet.

Her body quietened, she went numb. She braced for the next retort, she froze.

This was the beginning of her learning to disappear, to be invisible.

She adjusted to the belief that she was "too much," that she was "always getting it wrong." She didn't retreat from fear - she

retreated from being fully present in her own life, from exploring and expressing her potential, from hope that things could be different, better.

Later, in therapy, this memory surfaced as Jessie explored her early feelings of abandonment. She began to see how, as a child, not only had she been abandoned by those who were meant to keep her safe, she turned that abandonment inward. When no one came to meet her needs, she stopped reaching, stopped attempting to express them. Held them in, tried to figure life out by herself. In doing so, the process of abandoning herself began.

The Biology of Belonging

We can begin to understand this more clearly when we remember that from the moment a child is born, connection is a biological necessity. The human nervous system is like a musical instrument. It does not develop attunement nor does it calibrate in isolation. Stephen Porges, the founder of Polyvagal Theory, teaches that safety is not a cognitive judgement - it is a feeling conveyed through another's tone of voice, facial expression, movement, and touch. The nervous system is learning.

When a caregiver is able to meet a baby's cry with soothing, when they look upon the child with softness and consistent presence, the child's nervous system learns:

"I'm okay. I matter. I have value."

This is love in action -

love as mirroring

love as attunement

love as emotional nourishment

A child's nervous system relies on these micro-moments of emotional responsiveness to develop the capacity to self-soothe, to modulate emotions, and later, to navigate relationships.

Jessie's parents were often preoccupied - sometimes reactive and angry, often absent, many times holding an activated, unpredictable, even frightening energy.

She learned early that her feelings were "too much," her needs inconvenient, her attempts at peacekeeping unwelcome. She stopped crying not because she was content, but because her body shifted into what trauma theory calls the freeze and submit responses - the neurobiology of survival in an environment where comfort, protection, and acknowledgment are absent.

In Jessie's mind, she wasn't loved - and she couldn't coax love out of those around her no matter how hard she tried. Indeed, she was often punished for her efforts.

What Love Gives Us

Love, when expressed through consistent emotional attunement, gives a child the atmosphere needed to develop an emotionally healthy sense of self.

A self that grows in the presence of mirroring, emotional presence, and curiosity becomes grounded, coherent, capable of trusting its own needs. A self that grows in the absence of those relational nutrients becomes unsure, fragmented, or painfully self-doubting.

When a caregiver mirrors a child's feelings - naming, staying with, and supporting the emotional moment - the child experiences themselves as seen. They come to understand that they make sense.

Without this mirroring, confusion and shame fill in the gaps. A child may wonder:

"Why doesn't Mummy love me?"

"What's wrong with me?"

And eventually:

"I'm just not good enough."

Do you recognise yourself here? Do you sometimes feel that there's something wrong with you - that you can't find love or find yourself looking in all the wrong places?

Attuned love teaches us:

- how to feel safe inside ourselves
- how to express needs without fear
- how to love others without losing ourselves

When attunement is absent, the child adapts - brilliantly, creatively - but often at a cost. They may become overly competent, high-achieving, desperately caring, or numbed and withdrawn. These patterns often repeat across generations, especially when no one has been shown that healing is possible.

Jessie excelled in school. She was polite, quiet, competent - a model student. Teachers praised her. But she walked home feeling a hollowness she couldn't name. She returned each day to an environment devoid of warmth, interest, or joy. Her relational style was already forming:

pulling back from her needs before they had a chance to breathe.

Jessie was the model "good girl". She knew all the right things to do to keep those in charge, happy. *Do you notice strategies that you have adopted to keep the peace around you?*

The Cultural Silence Around Emotional Needs

Many people carry this quietly without realising how early these patterns began. Love is romanticised, commodified, or reduced to performance - good grades, obedience, productivity. The deeper emotional needs of children frequently go unnoticed, especially in families overwhelmed by stress, conflict, addiction, or the distractions of modern life.

We seldom speak about how emotional neglect shapes adult lives. When adults struggle with emptiness, loneliness, or relational confusion, it's often assumed to be a personal flaw.

But emptiness is often a developmental wound - a sign of what was never given, or something missing.

Jessie grew up before social media, yet she was already bending herself into shapes she hoped would make her more loveable. When this material arose in therapy, it gave us an opportunity to explore how the capacity for love and expectations of others, including societal expectations, repress our creativity and human expression, caging and shaping us into a form that fits the current trend or image desired for us.

This pressure is magnified by comparison culture. Emotional needs are buried even deeper. We lose sight of ourselves and our uniqueness, compounding the difficulty of being able to connect with others. Our basic human longing for connection that attunes with safety and closeness amplifies as an attachment wound and frequently goes unseen - even within ourselves.

As children we need to "fit in" to the image of our family or caregivers. We'll shape shift to make that as comfortable as possible.

How do you find yourself responding to social and family pressures to fit in?

Through a relational lens, we might begin to see that the self is not fixed, but something that continually emerges through our relationships and lived experiences

Love Expressed as Attunement Creates Safety

To love a child well is to attune to them - to notice their emotions, to respond with presence, to offer comfort when they are overwhelmed, to celebrate their joys, to stay near them in their struggles.

Love is not simply a feeling - it is a *practice*.

Attunement creates emotional safety.

Its absence creates threat.

Gestalt therapist Violet Oaklander wrote: "Children who are not seen, heard, and understood cannot fully develop."

Jessie was not seen.

Not heard.

Not understood.

She grew up confused by her feelings and ashamed of her needs. Her longing for love did not disappear - it simply went underground, hidden beneath achievement and self-doubt.

In therapy, Jessie revisited the memory of coming home from school to an empty emotional environment. Sitting with that absence - feeling the coldness and numbness of it in her body, noticing her senses becoming dull, foggy, confused - helped her to remember other situations in which these feelings emerged. She realised now how this numbing rendered her unable to resist or say "NO" when she was threatened in abusive relationships or by strangers.

Jessie was captured in a cage of - be a good girl, don't upset anyone, *do as you are told*. As we experimented with these feelings, Jessie began to understand how she avoids experiencing those sensations in her adult relationships - by retaining an emotional distance, by not trusting, by not engaging at a deeper level, by expecting betrayal. In the next chapter we'll begin to name this absence more clearly.

Practice: Sensing the Relational Field

If you would like to begin to sense into your own relational field, the relational atmosphere that you notice in your life, you might like to try this brief awareness exercise. Notice what feels accessible today. You don't need to go further than that.

1. Sit somewhere peaceful, quietly.
2. Feel your breath moving in and out.
3. Bring to mind someone you longed to be seen by.
4. Notice what arises: sensations, emotions, numbness, blankness, emptiness, a void or any other sensation.

What you feel here is the residue of unmet relational needs - the emotional imprint of absence.

Reflective Pause - Bringing Absence into Presence

This invitation is to support you to connect with your lived experiences of "something missing". You are encouraged to stay with this lightly. If reflection begins to feel heavy, step back if needed.

- Can you recall a time in early childhood when you needed emotional presence, and it wasn't there?
- How do you respond, inwardly or outwardly, when someone doesn't meet your emotional cues?
- Where in your body do you carry the experience of not being seen – tension, tightness, bracing, numbness?

In the chapters ahead, we will explore what happens when love is absent not only in childhood, but across the long arc of adulthood - and later, how healing becomes possible when we reconnect with the parts of ourselves that were left out in the cold. Because love is essential.

And it is never too late to learn how to bring more love into our lives - for ourselves and with others.

Further Reading

The Body Keeps the Score - Bessel van der Kolk

Polynagal Theory - Stephen Porges

Windows to Our Children - Violet Oaklander

Attached - Amir Levine & Rachel Heller