



## Humans and the Human Family are Special!



## MODULE 1



### 3. Our individual similarities and differences

As humans, we all share a life history and we all face the same life history challenges. Our brains all have the same basic structure and chemistry. These things that make us the same give us the same **social goals** and our common **personality trait** patterns. However because we have different **genes**, grow up in different families, have different friends and may face different kinds of stress and privilege, each person has a **unique** personality. So there are important ways that everyone is the same and there are important differences between us too.

#### Human social goals

Social goals determine what a person wants to do when he or she is with other people. A goal is something a person tries to achieve. There are four social goals humans have had since our species began:

1. Safety or attachment,
2. Care-giving,
3. Dominance and
4. Sex.

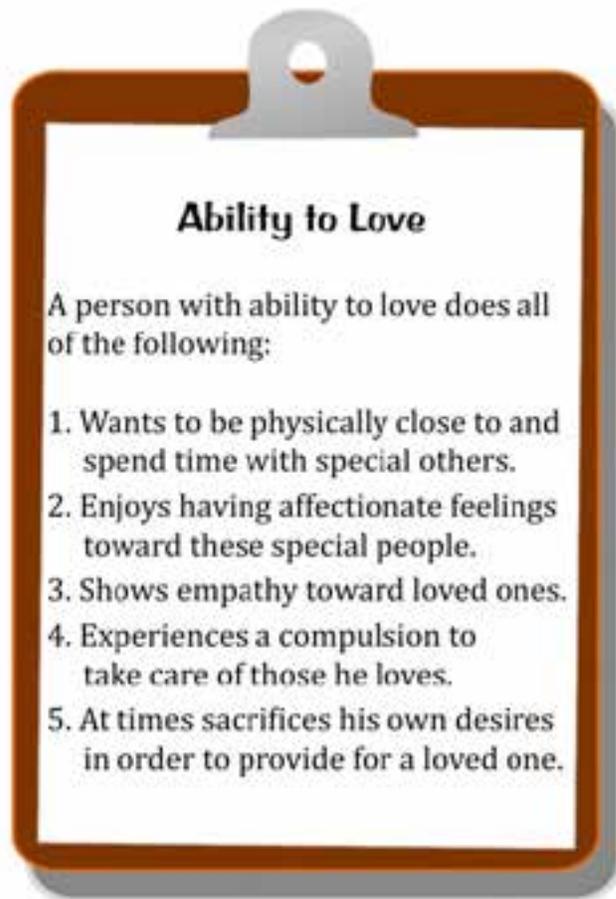
Each social goal has its own **brain circuit** that is both inborn and shaped by experience. Together attachment and care-giving determine a person's ability to love. The goal of dominance makes people want to have power and to resist control by others. The goal of the sexual system is sexual intimacy.

#### Human love

Humans are the most loving beings on Earth. Our loving tendencies are present at birth. No other species cares as much as we do; it is normal for us to even take care of strangers and other animals! Since we humans are so social, the ability to love is very important to us as a species. Love is the glue that binds us together; that is why scientists call it attachment. Without love, instead of being together, we would all be loners and want to live by ourselves. Without love, mothers and fathers would not care for children, husbands and wives would not stay together, and none of us would have any friends. In fact, for most of us, the ability to love is so much a part of who we are, that we take love for granted, and don't even stop to consider what it is.

Just what is this love glue that binds us together? Scientists have attempted to answer this question several ways. They have studied social animals, and have tried to understand what holds animal groups together. They have also studied disordered humans— people who seem to lack the glue. Studies of animals show that love-glue has at least four different ingredients. The first ingredient is called “proximity seeking.” Those

that love, tend to stick physically close to each other. The second ingredient involves identifying and preferring special others (like the ewe identifies her own lamb). The third ingredient involves pleasure. People who love each other really enjoy being together. The fourth ingredient involves pain. Pain is caused by separation from and loss of, loved ones. A relationship is called an “attachment” by scientists when there is a tendency to seek proximity to a specific, special other. People who are attached want to be close to each other especially when they are scared, sick or otherwise in need. A person shows an attachment to another person when he or she strongly desires to be with that person.



One of the interesting things about attachment is that it is to some degree neutral with regard to pleasure and pain. There are conditions under which animals will form attachments, even if those attachments do not cause them much pleasure. Attachments also sometimes form even if they cause pain. This pleasure/pain neutral characteristic of attachment is also seen in humans. Men and women often stick by abusive partners, and remarkably, some children are very attached to abusive parents.

What good does it serve for attachment to be pleasure/pain neutral? It is very important that attachment is pleasure/pain neutral. Even in loving relationships, there is some degree of competition. This competition or struggle for dominance sometimes causes pain and disagreements. If attachments depended on positive feelings or pleasure, then we would all part company after the first fight. We would not stay together very long!

In addition to attachment, love involves feelings of affection, empathy, and caretaking behavior. In part, it is our enjoyment of attachments that leads us to be empathetic, kind and caring. If we really enjoy being with a person, they become important to us and we tend to take care of them. Thus, our ability to love is limited by the degree to which we are able to enjoy other people. That is one reason why emotional health or mental illness affects all of a person’s relationships. A person who is depressed or anxious has a tough time enjoying being with other people.

## **The human desire for power**

When a person has power, he or she has control over things. Just as the desire for attachment is inborn, so is the desire for power. It is normal to want to be in charge of yourself, to be first in line and to like competition. Many people also like being in charge of others. The desire for power starts during the second year of life. Also, just as there are brain systems that produce loving behavior, there is also brain system that motivates competition and the desire for power. Just like there are individual differences in loving behavior, there are individual differences in power behavior. Competition and leadership are more important to some people than others. Just like parenting behavior is affected by hormones, power oriented behavior is affected by hormones, including testosterone.

During childhood, we learn that doing well in school and being good at things is a source of power. We also learn to get power by making friends and being nice to others. We master self-control and learn to replace aggression with better strategies for power. All types of aggression are related to the desire for power. Aggression can be physical and involve hitting someone. It can also be social and involve spreading rumors about another person.

## **The balance between love and power**

There is a natural tension or conflict between our desire to be with others and our selfish desires. Children have to learn that sometimes getting along means letting go of desires that hurt our relationships. Since learning to love starts at birth, long before the desire for power, love acts throughout life to keep selfishness and aggression in check. If a child does not learn to love, that child may be more aggressive and self-centered. As we will cover in other modules, learning to love also enhances children's self-control. Children who have more self-control are better able to handle their angry and aggressive impulses. They can choose to use their words rather than their fists!



## Human personality traits

Along with self-control, a person's ability to love and desire for power shape **personality traits**. These traits reflect a person's usual way of doing things. Years of psychology research has discovered that humans have five basic classes of personality traits, called the BIG 5. The Big 5 can be remembered using the letters OCEAN:

1. **Openness to Experience** (sometimes called Intellect or Intellect/Imagination). Includes traits like having wide interests, and being imaginative and insightful.
2. **Conscientiousness**. Includes traits like self-disciplined, organized, thorough, and planful.
3. **Extraversion**. Encompasses specific traits like talkative, energetic, and assertive.
4. **Agreeableness**. Includes traits like sympathetic, kind, and affectionate.
5. **Neuroticism** (sometimes reversed and called Emotional Stability). Includes traits like tense, anger-prone, moody, and anxious.

Love goals play a role in the development of agreeableness and power goals play a role in the development of extraversion. Both conscientiousness and neuroticism relate to self-control. Neurotic people or those high in neuroticism, are prone to excessive sadness, fear and anger. Stressful childhood experiences play a role in how neuroticism develops. The Big 5 traits are important because research has shown they are connected to mental health and well-being. **Conscientiousness predicts health as well as school and work success.** That is because self-control and thoughtful decision making help a person make better choices. Scientific research has consistently linked three things to health and well-being: strong relationships with others (relatedness), the ability to do age appropriate tasks (competency), and the opportunity to control some aspects of life (autonomy). Our personality traits influence our ability to relate to others (agreeableness), our ability to learn and accomplish tasks (openness and conscientiousness), and our ability to seek control over our lives (extraversion and neuroticism). The Big 5 traits are both genetically determined or inborn AND influenced by how we are raised. We will discuss well-being, the development of the Big 5 traits and the importance of self-control in other modules.

Learn more about the Big 5: <http://pages.uoregon.edu/sanjay/bigfive.html>

Take the Big 5 test here: <http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~johnlab/bfi.htm>

Learn about well-being here: <http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/>