It’s often said that the opposite to love is not hate, it’s indifference. Why then are some of us so seemingly fickle in our ability to switch from love to hate in an instant?

To understand hate, we must first (try to) understand love.

Psychologists are not even in agreement that love is truly an emotion. Some argue it is more a form of temporary insanity, a sweet madness that allows us to overlook our loved one’s failings at least long enough to procreate and, for a lucky few, remain truly, deeply attached until death do us part.

Love certainly brings with it a strong “approach” motivation. We are drawn almost magnetically to having close and intimate contact with our loved one. The physiology of love is well understood – excited heartbeat, nervous sweating, ardent respiration and a cascade of happy neurotransmitters.

One aspect of falling in love may actually help us understand how quickly we can switch to hate. In 1974, researchers conducted a fascinating experiment in which they asked young men to cross a bridge to chat to an attractive female research assistant on the other side. One bridge was stable, the other rickety. Men who crossed the rickety bridge (thereby raising their heart rate and respiration via fear) were significantly more likely to ask the research assistant out on a post-interview date.
This study was interpreted as providing evidence for the Schachter and Singer model of emotion – in the case of an uncertain cause of our physiological response, we seek out a rationale before “feeling” our subjective emotion.

In this case, the men’s adrenaline rush was really caused by the unstable bridge. But they wrongly attributed their physiological response to the female research assistant, believing themselves to be attracted to her.

In other words, love could just be a massive attribution error. Hence the advice from dating experts to take your person of interest out on an “exciting” date – basically to fool them into thinking the emotions they are feeling are in response to all of your thrilling qualities, rather than bungee jumping off a cliff.

As the physiology underpinning love and hate are very similar (increased heart rate, respiration and so on), a simple perceptual change could transform one’s object of desire to object of derision. Hence our collective understanding of that quick switch that can lead to “crimes of passion” or “love-hate relationships”.

Neurologically, researchers have found a unique pattern of activity for hate in the brain that is distinct from the pattern for love. This activity involves parts of the cerebral cortex that are responsible for planning and organisational skills.

In love, large parts of the cerebral cortex are deactivated; in hate, only small parts are deactivated. In love individuals might shut down negative judgments; in hate individuals might shut down their ability to self-reflect.

Hate also has an “approach” motivational basis focused on devaluing, diminishing or destroying another’s wellbeing. Hate is fuelled by anger, the primary goal of which is to remove a perceived obstacle, such as the hated other.

Cognitive attributions reportedly sustain hate via moral judgements that the hated other is evil. Research suggests that hate might serve as a self-protective mechanism that masks insecurities resulting from feeling helpless and weak, offering psychological protection.

Hate is sometimes the reaction to people we have loved and invested ourselves in, which manifests itself when an agreement that was vital to the maintenance of the relationship is broken, such as separation.

But what is going on when hate fails to diminish after a period of time? Might it serve as a bizarre form of attachment? Might hate even serve as an attempt to maintain a bond (no matter how dysfunctionally) with a former loved one – for example, through rumination, stalking or abusive behaviour?

This peculiar, ongoing hateful attachment to a previous partner causes serious problems in our society. In 2015, there were 23,063 divorces in Australia involving 42,303 children. With the majority
of parents able to move on from their separation, approximately 10% to 15% remain entrenched in conflict.

This minority reportedly consumes an estimated 90% of court resources, and can involve litigation, withholding of children, denigration, involvement of child protection or other related family support services, withholding of financial resources and difficulties in shared parenting.

What hate does at the point of separation is clear – the primary purpose of maintaining hate beyond that is unknown.

One thing we do know is that little good ever comes from hate. More often than not it results in a lose-lose situation. Or, as Martin Luther King more eloquently noted:

Hate is just as injurious to the hater as it is to the hated. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality ... Hate is too great a burden to bear.

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