

TED Talk Script

0:11 I was recently traveling in the Highlands of New Guinea, and I was talking with a man who had three wives. I asked him, "How many wives would you like to have?" And there was this long pause, and I thought to myself, "Is he going to say five? Is he going to say 10? Is he going to say 25?" And he leaned towards me and he whispered, "None."

0:31(Laughter)

0:34 Eighty-six percent of human societies permit a man to have several wives: polygyny. But in the vast majority of these cultures, only about five or ten percent of men actually do have several wives. Having several partners can be a toothache. In fact, co-wives can fight with each other, sometimes they can even poison each other's children. And you've got to have a lot of cows, a lot of goats, a lot of money, a lot of land, in order to build a harem.

1:02 We are a pair-bonding species. Ninety-seven percent of mammals do not pair up to rear their young; human beings do. I'm not suggesting that we're not -- that we're necessarily sexually faithful to our partners. I've looked at adultery in 42 cultures, I understand, actually, some of the genetics of it, and some of the brain circuitry of it. It's very common around the world, but we are built to love.

1:26 How is technology changing love? I'm going to say almost not at all. I study the brain. I and my colleagues have put over 100 people into a brain scanner -- people who had just fallen happily in love, people who had just been rejected in love and people who are in love long-term. And it is possible to remain "in love" long-term. And I've long ago maintained that we've evolved three distinctly different brain systems for mating and reproduction: sex drive, feelings of intense romantic love and feelings of deep cosmic attachment to a long-term partner. And together, these three brain systems -- with many other parts of the brain -- orchestrate our sexual, our romantic and our family lives.

2:13 But they lie way below the cortex, way below the limbic system where we feel our emotions, generate our emotions. They lie in the most primitive parts of the brain, linked with energy, focus, craving, motivation, wanting and drive. In this case, the drive to win life's greatest prize: a mating partner. They evolved over 4.4 million years ago among our first ancestors, and they're not going to change if you swipe left or right on Tinder.

2:45(Laughter)

2:47(Applause)

2:49 There's no question that technology is changing the way we court: emailing, texting, emojis to express your emotions, sexting, "liking" a photograph, selfies ... We're seeing new rules and taboos for how to court. But, you know -- is this actually dramatically changing love? What about the late 1940s, when the automobile became very popular and we suddenly had rolling bedrooms?

3:20(Laughter)

3:21 How about the introduction of the birth control pill? Unchained from the great threat of pregnancy and social ruin, women could finally express their primitive and primal sexuality.

3:36 Even dating sites are not changing love. I'm Chief Scientific Advisor to Match.com, I've been it for 11 years. I keep telling them and they agree with me, that these are not dating sites, they are introducing sites. When you sit down in a bar, in a coffee house, on a park bench, your ancient brain snaps into action like a sleeping cat awakened, and you smile and laugh and listen and parade the way our ancestors did 100,000 years ago. We can give you various people -- all the dating sites can -- but the only real algorithm is your own human brain. Technology is not going to change that.

4:20 Technology is also not going to change who you choose to love. I study the biology of personality, and I've come to believe that we've evolved four very broad styles of thinking and behaving, linked with the dopamine, serotonin, testosterone and estrogen systems. So I created a questionnaire directly from brain science to measure the degree to which you express the traits -- the constellation of traits -- linked with each of these four brain systems. I then put that questionnaire on various dating sites in 40 countries. Fourteen million or more people have now taken the questionnaire, and I've been able to watch who's naturally drawn to whom.