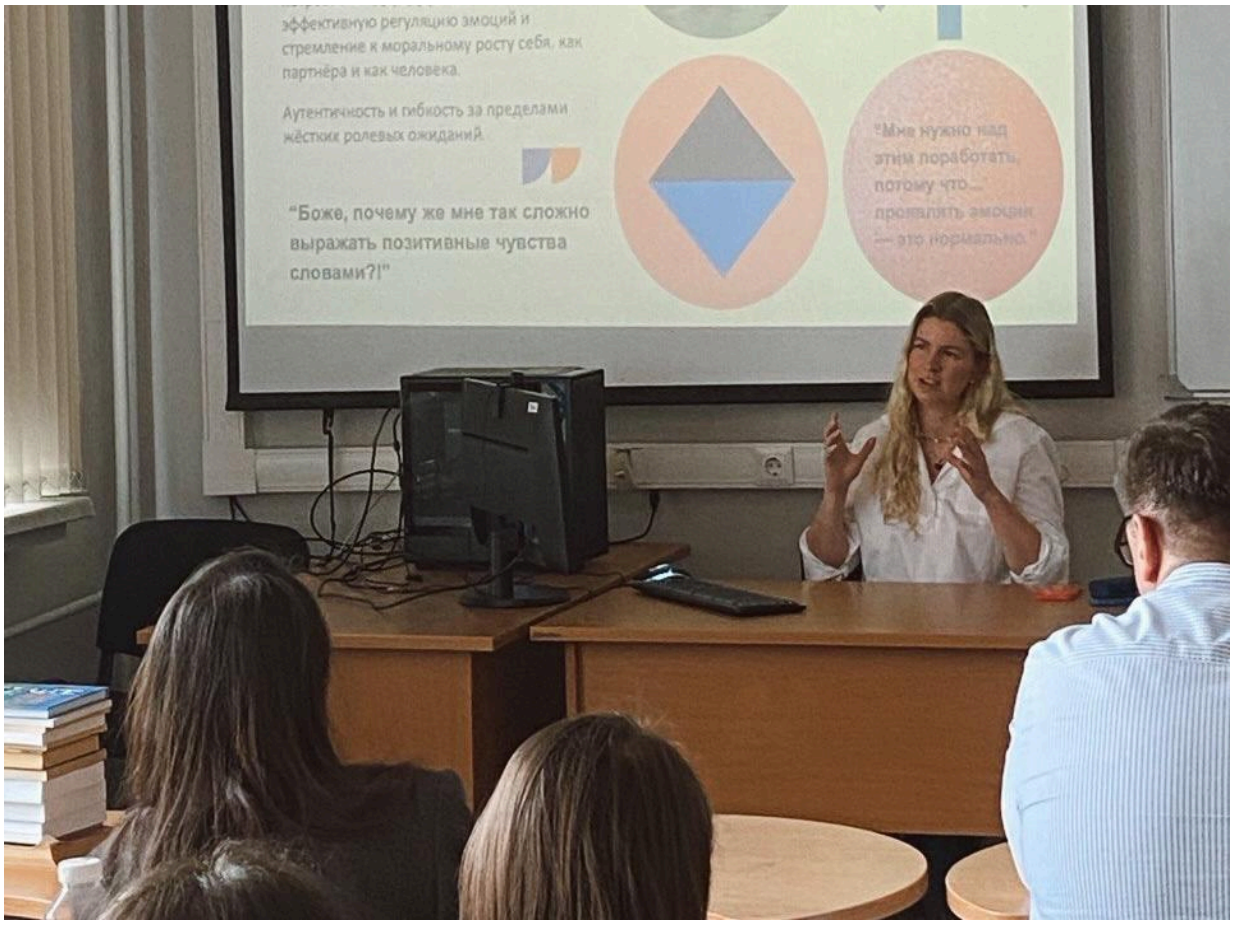
Growing in love

This essay is based on my paper published in Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies. Here, I share my reflections three years after conducting the research, and a year after its publication. The paper is available here: Pankratova, A. (2025). Qualitative study of emotional work and emotional labor in intimate relationships. Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies, 25(2), 305-325. 10.1080/14779757.2025.2565765
Most studies mentioned here are referenced in the paper.
Feel free to reach out with any questions, ideas or if you are also interested in the topics I raise here. I truly believe in meaningful connections: a.o.pankratova@gmail.com



Picture was taken at the Russian Community for Person-Centered Approach conference in HSE Moscow, October 2026

I enjoy reflecting on love because so much of life begins in it and is lived for it. I am fascinated by how love turns living beings into a dyad – something new and enriched, not a sum of all variables, but something greater, the way H2O is different from oxygen and hydrogen taken separately. Sergei Rubinstein, a Russian psychologist and philosopher, wrote: "Love is the affirmation of the existence of another and the

revelation of their essence". I think this works in reverse as well: by loving, we reveal not only the essence of the other but also discover who we are. This is a complex and challenging process. Love, like litmus paper, reveals what shaped us and invites us to explore it, acknowledge it, and make decicions with it in heart and mind.

Yet this invitation is not always gentle. Sometimes the path leads us into misunderstanding, the shadows of past traumas, the burden of carrying the load alone, symbiotic fusion, or icy alienation. Then the relationship asks for effort, the way a garden asks for tending. But a question kept nagging at me: if people put in the effort, why do some relationships grow stronger while others slowly poison the people in them?

I was giving a presentation about emotional work the other day at HSE University in Moscow. This topic caught my attention a few years ago because I have long been interested in intimacy and the depth of contact. Arlie Hochschild introduced emotional labor for the management of feeling done for a wage, and emotional work for the same kind of effort in private life. Broadly, emotional work is defined as something we deliberately do with our emotions for a specific purpose: putting on a brave face when things go wrong, or showing a reaction more vividly because we know it matters to our partner or because we are waiting for their response. With strangers we can simply display an emotion, like smiling at a passerby – that's surface acting. In closeness however we rarely do so, we're either genuine or doing the deep work (trying to align actual, internal feelings with the emotional needs of the partner) – we want to stay connected and accepted. So we may take a risk of showing our authentic reactions or regulate ourselves to what we assume is most suitable to the situation. One of my respondents said:

"Sometimes, If I tell her this, it might only complicate things further, and then it will be hard to go back.This is my quirk: sometimes I can convey both honesty and deception with the same facial expression. It can be tough to tell when I'm joking and when I'm serious. Unfortunately, I do use this to my advantage at times. I always aim to respond with a smile, no matter the situation".

This is immediate relief at the cost of authenticity, on one hand. On the other hand, not taking on a heavy load when it feels like too much is, in a sense, also caring for the relationship, at least in the short run. It looks like a survival strategy; the longer-term aim would be to find a rhythm where efforts are more balanced.

Another respondent said:

“I need care but he doesn’t seem to notice unless I look really, I mean, REALLY tired or sick. So I find myself exaggerating my normal reactions and that’s so sad”.

Being noticed is a core relational need. The paradox is that having to ask for it, or to explain why we need it, strips the act of its value. If we have to spell out our need to be seen, the care that follows feels like a chore done on instruction rather than a spontaneous gift.

And what makes it even more complicated is that the whole process is invisible – we might not even notice the gears turning inside, the cauldron brewing its mixture of feelings, and, unlike therapists, partners can easily miss signs of burnout in each other for exactly this reason.

The way we do this work grows out of attachment patterns formed in childhood. Anxious attachment can turn love into constant monitoring: hiding one’s own emotions while attuning excessively to a partner – this pattern often leads to burnout. Avoidant attachment tends toward withdrawal when things get hard and difficulty expressing vulnerability, which can breed loneliness. Suppressed emotions combined with low self-esteem can pull a person toward codependency. With a more secure attachment, self-regulation and co-regulation create the emotional safety in which intimacy can flourish. And as attachment becomes more secure, the labor of love begins to feel a little lighter. That is the textbook story, and I wrote it in my paper.

But after publishing, it did not sit right with me. Perhaps my main insight since is this: **the deepest and most satisfying relationships can also be the most exhausting**. This seems counterintuitive, yet it feels to me like a natural consequence of genuine intimacy, vulnerability, and shared lived experience. Let me try to explain.

In truly close relationships we take off our masks and try to stay authentic. But masks and roles offer the luxury of quick decisions and quick words. Sometimes I spend hours, days, even weeks looking for the right words to answer a message from someone truly dear to me. Sometimes it ends with “I still haven’t figured out what to say.” And that feels like a greater contribution to the relationship than a universal template like “have a good day.” Templates feel like fast food: quick satiation, and an aftertaste of having gone against my values. The effort of searching for those very words gives me a deep sense of security and belonging. All real living is meeting, as Martin Buber said.

Here are the things I have found to require the most effort.

Hating what you fell in love with. We are drawn to traits we lack: an introvert admires

someone with highly charged social batteries, a peacemaker is fascinated by someone who easily stands up for themselves, or for both. Year by year we see the other side of the coin. Our differences also make space for growth: learning to admire from a distance, with empathy and self-empathy.

Loving someone whose growth keeps its own timetable. Seeing a partner suffer. Not being their therapist or parent, not being able to heal their wounds, even when you can see exactly where those wounds come from and they themselves know in which direction they need to grow. Wanting to meet in depth and not always being able to. A friend of mine, a therapist, once said: “I wish I could talk to my partner the way I talk to my fellow therapists.” People have different languages for their inner life, and not everyone needs to speak the one we practice. Still, it can feel like a loss that not every togetherness holds that depth and those subtle nuances.

Doing what feels unnatural. One male respondent said: “Because many of such things feel unnatural to me… but for the good of the family, children, my wife, I’m working on myself.” Many of us were raised in societies where talking about feelings, or even giving them time and value, runs against what children are taught. Boys are told not to cry; girls are not allowed to get angry; vulnerability is treated as weakness no matter the gender. Many respondents said it was hard to express warm feelings in words. “It’s like something’s wrong with me, people around me seem to do it so easily.” It is worth asking why something feels unnatural: is it who I am, or is it the weight of cultural norms? I also wonder about the advice, drawn largely from individualistic models, to verbalize everything through I-messages. It may suit those who want to try it, but I am not sure it is the only road. Learning to notice, and making sure the partner knows they were noticed, may matter more.

Empathy in deep connection also has its price. In deep connection a partner’s pain, anxiety, or stress partly becomes your own, and prolonged empathy can be particularly draining. Self-empathy is sometimes read as detachment, and sometimes it really does block the way to togetherness.

Feeling disagreements more sharply. Every disagreement is felt more acutely when we are deeply attached. Resolving complex, intertwined problems takes far more mental and physical strength than ordinary quarrels, and sometimes, in exhaustion, there is simply nothing left for emotional work. We need to be understood, and not by just anyone but by our partner. Missing that togetherness is lonely, and the loneliness hits harder when we are in a relationship.

Living through jealousy. We may trust each other and be compassionate, yet I always think of my golden retriever. He is goofy and very genuine: when he sees me petting another animal or a soft toy, he gets angry and businesslike, nudging his head under my hand and announcing with his whole body that there should be only one recipient of love. It is hard to explain that I have enough capacity in my heart to hold him, grandma and grandpa, and our friend's little Yorkie. Just as hard as to be an enlightened, mature partner who doesn't let jealousy flood their inner peace – processing it takes a great deal of effort. And sometimes it is easier to take a step back towards this animal's genuineness. Yet it rarely leaves us certain that we did the right thing.

Carl Rogers once said: "Every man-woman relationship must be worked at, built, rebuilt, and continually refreshed by mutual growth." From what I have observed, both growth and avoiding growth take effort. But the effort is not a sign that the love is broken. Often, it is the very proof that the love is real. The question is what the effort is aimed at. I like to think it is aimed at the profound gift of having someone witness our growth, no matter how big or small, and to witness theirs in return.