

PASSION

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PASSION

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Philosophy, Affective Science

1. Core Definition

Passion is defined fundamentally as a severe, driving, or all-consuming sensation or conviction that profoundly affects an individual's psychological and motivational state. Unlike simple feelings or transient moods, passion implies a deep, often sustained intensity and a central commitment of the self. This intensity positions passion as a powerful motivational force, often dictating behavior, attention, and long-term goals. In its psychological context, passion represents a state where the individual is involuntarily affected by a powerful affective experience, frequently bordering on obsession or total absorption.

Historically, and particularly in contexts related to interpersonal relationships, passion has been narrowly associated with intense carnal or romantic desire. This connotation emphasizes its involuntary, biological, and sometimes overwhelming nature, linking it closely to the concept of eros or physical yearning. However, a broader contemporary understanding recognizes passion as an intense liking, enthusiasm for, or deep commitment to an activity, item, idea, or abstract goal. This latter definition moves beyond mere affect to include volitional investment and dedication, suggesting a fusion of cognitive valuation and affective intensity.

Therefore, the concept of **passion** operates on a spectrum, ranging from uncontrollable, severe physical desire to a sustained, highly motivated commitment to non-sexual endeavors, such as a career, hobby, or social cause. What unites these diverse manifestations is the overwhelming power--the "all-consuming" nature--that passion exerts over the individual's attention and resources, distinguishing it sharply from milder preferences or interests.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **passion** originates from the Latin word *passio*, meaning suffering or enduring, which itself is derived from the verb *pati* (to suffer, bear, or undergo). This etymology is crucial, as it framed early philosophical and theological understandings of passion not as an active feeling, but as a state of being acted upon--a passive affliction or disturbance of the soul. In Christian theology, the term is most famously used in reference to the Passion of Christ, signifying his suffering and sacrifice.

During the classical and early modern periods, passion was largely viewed with suspicion by philosophers, notably the Stoics. Passions were considered irrational forces that undermined reason and moral virtue, leading to error and unhappiness. Thinkers sought to achieve *apatheia*, a state of freedom from these overwhelming disturbances. Figures like René Descartes, in *The*

Passions of the Soul (1649), attempted to systematically categorize and understand these involuntary affective states, though the fundamental tension between rational control and the overwhelming nature of passion remained central to the discourse.

The Enlightenment gradually shifted the focus from passion as pure affliction toward its role as a potentially positive, motivating force necessary for artistic creation and political change. With the rise of modern psychology in the 19th and 20th centuries, the definition broadened significantly. While retaining its association with intense romantic love (e.g., the example of "no passion in the marriage anymore"), passion was also increasingly studied as a fundamental component of motivation, commitment, and self-actualization. This development allowed for the categorization of passion into forms that could be beneficial or detrimental, linking the concept directly to human thriving and psychological stability.

3. Key Characteristics

The characteristics of passion differentiate it from milder emotional states or simple interests. Passion involves a profound investment of energy and identity, manifesting several defining attributes that are consistent across its romantic, occupational, and intellectual contexts.

Intensity and Severity: Passion is characterized by an extreme level of emotional and cognitive engagement. It is described as a "severe, driving, or all-consuming sensation," meaning it dominates consciousness and energy resources. This intensity ensures that the object of passion holds priority over competing demands or interests, often leading to deep immersion.

Involuntary Affective Response: In its historical and interpersonal meaning, passion suggests an individual being "effected involuntarily." This highlights the component of powerful, often spontaneous emotional arousal and physiological reaction that is not always subject to immediate conscious control. This involuntary aspect distinguishes basic passion from mere rational dedication or calculated interest.

High Commitment and Centrality to Identity: Whether the passion is for a person or an activity, it involves an intense liking and dedication. The commitment is deep, making the object of passion central to the individual's sense of self and their self-narrative. The activity or person becomes integral to their definition of who they are, fostering persistent engagement even in the face of setbacks.

Motivational Persistence: Passion provides extraordinary drive and persistence, enabling individuals to overcome obstacles and dedicate long hours to the object of their commitment. It serves as a powerful source of intrinsic motivation, making the activity itself rewarding, irrespective of external outcomes such as financial gain or social status.

4. Psychological Dimensions: The Dualistic Model

In contemporary psychology, particularly within motivation and personality research, the concept of passion has been formalized through the Dualistic Model of Passion (DMP), primarily proposed by Robert Vallerand and colleagues. This model posits that passion is a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that one loves, finds important, and invests significant time and energy into. Crucially, the model differentiates between two distinct ways in which an activity can be internalized into one's identity.

The first type is **Harmonious Passion** (HP). HP results from an autonomous internalization of the activity into identity. The individual feels free and in control of their engagement; the passion is integrated smoothly with other life domains. When engaged in the activity, the person experiences deep concentration and flow, but they can easily disengage when necessary, maintaining balance and psychological flexibility. This form of passion is consistently linked to positive outcomes, including higher life satisfaction, enhanced creativity, positive emotions, and better physical health.

The second type is **Obsessive Passion** (OP). OP results from a controlled internalization of the activity, often stemming from internal pressures (such as ego involvement, contingent self-esteem) or external pressures (social approval, fear of loss). The person feels compelled to engage in the activity, leading to psychological rigidity and conflict with other life areas. If the individual cannot engage, they experience significant guilt, anxiety, and defensiveness. OP is associated with negative outcomes, including burnout, rigid persistence in the face of injury, rumination, and higher levels of negative affect, despite achieving high performance in the short term.

5. Passion in Relationships and Desire

The primary colloquial and literary use of **passion** centers on intense interpersonal attraction and romantic desire, often specifically referring to sexual or carnal desire. This usage aligns with the original definition of a "severe carnal desire" and distinguishes the intense, often immediate affective experience from long-term companionship or commitment. In relationship science, passion is typically understood as the motivational component of love, characterized by physiological arousal, powerful attraction, and the powerful drive for physical and emotional union.

Psychologists often employ the triangular theory of love (Sternberg) to frame this aspect, where passion forms one essential vertex of the triangle, alongside intimacy and commitment. Passion here is generally rapid in onset and offset, relying heavily on novelty, idealization, and physiological stimulation. Unlike commitment, which grows steadily, or intimacy, which deepens slowly, passion tends to peak early and may naturally decline in intensity over the course of a long-term relationship. The lack of this component--as exemplified by the source context quote ("She claims she left him because there was no passion in the marriage anymore")--indicates a perceived failing in the affective and motivational intensity required to sustain romantic satisfaction, even if intimacy

and commitment (often referred to as compassionate love) remain robust.

6. Significance and Impact

The significance of passion extends far beyond individual motivation; it is deemed critical for achieving high levels of expertise, fostering societal innovation, and promoting long-term well-being. Passionate dedication is frequently cited as a necessary precursor for attaining expert performance across domains, ranging from music and athletics to scientific research, underpinning theories of deliberate practice. The deep commitment inherent in passion sustains the often arduous and non-immediately rewarding work required for mastery.

Furthermore, passion holds substantial cultural and entrepreneurial value. Societies often celebrate individuals driven by passion, seeing it as the essential engine of creative destruction, innovation, and progress. In the workplace, passion is frequently leveraged as a measure of employee engagement and intrinsic motivation, though organizations must carefully navigate the subtle distinction between fostering harmonious passion, which leads to sustainable productivity, and encouraging the unsustainable and potentially destructive demands of obsessive passion. Ultimately, passion is fundamental to defining an individual's sense of meaning and purpose, translating internal values and convictions into external action and accomplishment, thereby profoundly influencing quality of life.

7. Further Reading

[Passion \(Emotion\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Passion in Psychology - Psychology Today](#)

[Vallerand, R. J. \(2003\). The Dualistic Model of Passion.](#)

[The Passions in 17th and 18th Century Philosophy - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)