"LOVE" ADDICTIONS--FOR WOMEN ONLY (And The Men Who Have the Courage to Know Them): A Feminist Perspective

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Forward

When I wrote the book, *Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places, Male Menopause,* and *Irritable Male Syndrome,* in 1980, no one had ever hear of “sex” or “love” addiction. The idea that someone could get hooked on relationships was unheard of, something that didn’t seem possible.

Yet, more and more people came to realize that we can get as hooked on sex, love, or relationships, as we can on cocaine, heroin, or gambling. This one of a number of booklets I wrote to help people understand these problems, particularly women. They are not polished and well edited, but rather are personal, honest, and written from my experience, both as a therapist and someone who has dealt with sex and love addiction in his own relationships.

Most of the issues I wrote about then, are equally true now. I look forward to your feedback and comments.

If you ever asked yourself, “Is it love, or is it addiction,” this booklet is for you.

"Addiction is not an abnormality in our society. It is not an aberration from the norm; it is itself the norm."  Stanton Peele, Ph.D.

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**Introduction**

I'm always a bit suspicious when women write books about men and when men write books about what's really going on with women. Although we are all human and anyone who has experienced the human condition deeply can help us all know ourselves better, still there is a difference between women's experience and men's experience.

Since I am going to write about women, I feel I owe it to you to give you the reasons and suggest why I think it is worth your time to read this booklet. First, there is a glut of information, a lot of it in women's magazines and the popular press, about the way women love. A great deal of it is not helpful. It polarizes men from women and ultimately helps create more separation between people which is at the center of the "relationship crisis" so many of us experience. I feel I have some useful things to say about sex, love, romance, intimacy and the ways addictive patterns interfere.

Second, I feel that we can often learn things from people who are outside the system. They often have a perspective that those of us on the inside lack. I remember learning a great deal about my own sexuality from feminist writers like Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Elizabeth Janeway, Elizabeth Kubler Ross, and Deena Metzger. The title alone of one of Metzger's book, *The Woman Who Slept With Men to Take The War Out of Them*, is inspiring. I think I have a perspective on women and feminism, as an "outsider" that can be helpful.

Finally, in my own growth and recovery from many of the "love" addictions--sex, romance, and relationship addictions--I have had to go deeply inside myself. In my own meditations I am guided by a male God-like figure named Guntar and a female Goddess-like figure named Rebecca. The women in my own life have been very important to me and the "woman in me," the anima as Carl Jung calls her, has been a constant source of guidance. I hope my understanding of the feminine in me, may be of help to women (and men) in their own journey inward. I've spent a lot of my life looking for love and am just now beginning to be able to distinguish the "wrong" places from the "right" places to look.

When we find that our romantic relationships are a series of disappointments yet continue to pursue them, we are looking for love in all the wrong places. When we are overwhelmed by our physical attraction to a new person, when the chemistry feels "fantastic," and we are sure that this time we have found someone who will make us
whole, we are looking for love in all the wrong places. When we are in a committed relationship but find ourselves constantly attracted to others, we are looking for love in all the wrong places. When our desire for "more sex and romance" interferes with our family or professional lives, we are looking for love in all the wrong places. When we are as preoccupied with not having sex as others are with having it, we are looking for love in all the wrong places.

Clinicians and researchers have only recently recognized that hidden below the surface of this endless search for love and romance is a deadly addiction. Stanton Peele, one of the first serious researchers to focus on relationship addictions, says:

Many of us are addicts, only we don't know it. We turn to each other out of the same needs that drive some people to drink and others to heroin. Interpersonal addiction, love addiction, is just about the most common yet least recognized form of addiction we know.

Peele makes clear that love is an ideal vehicle for addiction because it can so exclusively claim a person's consciousness. Addictive relationships are patterned, predictable, and isolated. When a person goes to another with the aim of filling an inner void, the relationship quickly becomes the center of his or her life. The core of addiction comes from the void we feel inside that continually calls out to be filled.

There is still controversy and confusion over definitions in this relatively new, emerging field of study. However, the following is offered as a working definition of "love" addiction: Pursuing sex, romance, and/or relationships in an attempt to relieve emotional pain and fill a perceived inner void. This behavior is compulsive, out of control, and continues in spite of adverse effects on our lives.

One of the major programs designed for relationship addicts, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (S.L.A.A.), describes the people who are its members as suffering from a compulsive need for sex, and/or a desperate attachment to one person. What all members have in common is an obsessive/compulsive pattern, either sexual, emotional, or both, in which relationships or activities have become increasingly destructive in all areas of their lives--career, family, and sense of self-respect.
I have found it useful to separate the "love" addictions into sex addictions, romance addictions, relationship addictions, and the core addiction. I put "love" in quotes because I don't think it is really love we seek. As Robin Norwood suggests in her book *Women Who Love Too Much*, many women believe what they are seeking is love, but they are really afraid of love. She says, "It means, in truth, obsessing about a man and calling that obsession love. It means measuring the degree of your love by the depth of your torment." As a popular song concludes, "You're walking the wire of pain and desire, looking for 'love' in between." Those of us who are "love" addicts are more concerned with getting a sexual, romantic, or relationship "fix" than we are about relating to a real human being.

We are in fact terrified of getting close to others and we are just as terrified about getting close to ourselves. I will discuss this more later. For now, I'd like to share some of my own experience with the "love" addictions.

**Looking For Love In All The Wrong Places: A Guided Tour**

When I first suspected that my own sexual behavior was compulsive and destructive, I denied it. I told myself that all men masturbate, read pornography, undress pretty women in their minds, and are preoccupied with sex. After all, I reasoned, I don't do anything to hurt anyone and I can stop whenever I want to. (Though I never wanted to.) The fact that there were times that I would masturbate 20 or 30 times a day, spend hours reading pornography, and roam the streets looking in bedroom windows hoping to see some "action," made me feel foolish and ashamed. But I rationalized that I was under a lot of pressure and needed some "fun" to relieve the tension.

I began going to Twelve Step Programs such as A.A. and Al-Anon, not because I needed any help, but because I wanted to know what resources were available for the addicts I was treating in my counseling practice. (It's interesting, isn't it, how we choose our professions "by accident," but with the unconscious desire to heal ourselves?)

It wasn't until I had spent a year going to Synanon (to be able to help the heroin addicts I was seeing) that it dawned on me that the way I related to sex, romance, and relationships was the same way that alcoholics and heroin addicts related to their drug of choice.

Not only was I preoccupied with sex, but I was forever "falling in love." I considered myself a hopeless romantic and felt very proud of the fact. I brought my new love flowers
everyday for a month. I spent days planning our dates, compulsively scouring the town to find just the right restaurant, taping music for 18 hours one day so that I could provide just the right mood, learned to read poetry that I hated because the poet was supposed to be a romantic and tragic figure. I had little interest in getting to know the other person. The thought of real intimacy terrified me. If I got too close I was sure I would be smothered or abandoned.

I loved romantic music. I had the fantasy that all the women I fell in love with were twin sisters of the woman who sang “To know, know, know him, is to love, love, love him. Just to see him smile, makes my life worthwhile.” That was my secret desire to have a beautiful, sexy woman, that all my friends would die to be seen with, but who only had eyes for me (God, there's another one of those songs again). I need do nothing to meet her. Just walk into the room on some enchanted evening. (All evenings are enchanted for romance addicts). Our eyes would meet across a crowded room as a woman in blue velvet sings the refrain from *Unchained Melody* --"Oh my love, my darling, I've hungered for your touch, a long lonely night." I need do nothing to have her. I just introduce myself, "Hi, I'm Jed." Instant love. To know me (my name) is to love me. I need do nothing to keep her. All that is required is that I smile (and I was very good at smiling) and not only did it make her days worthwhile, but also her nights, and her whole life.

The fact that these "love affairs" were short lived was O.K., because it was better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all. I fancied myself to be "The Moonlight Gambler" (another song hero). He sang, "I've gambled for match sticks, I've gambled for gold. The stakes maybe, heavy or small. But if you've never gambled for love in the moonlight, then you've never gambled at all." I haven't heard that song in 35 years, yet I still remember the words and the feelings still influence my life. All romance addicts have songs like that. What are your songs?

In my fantasy I was the moonlight gambler who women instantly fell in love with. In my fantasy, to know me was to love me. But in my heart of hearts, in the depth of my soul, I believed a quite different truth, "to know me, is to leave me." Like all addicts I felt that at the core of my being there was something evil, or even worse, that at my core there was nothing. If you really got close you would find out the truth, and then I would be all alone and die.
I am also a relationship addict. Even as I child, I knew I would fall in love, marry early, and live happily ever after. The day after I turned 19, I met her. It was love at first sight and we soon talked of marriage and how many kids we wanted. She wanted to wait until I finished medical school, but the thought of being alone made me uncomfortable. Everyone I saw seemed to be paired up. Life just made more sense as a couple. Once I decided "this is the one," I quickly became "attached." I was very jealous of anyone who paid wife a complement. She was mine and I was hers. When times were tough, we held each other tight and reassured each other that "it's us against the world."

In spite of our fights, infidelities, open marriage, broken promises, sleepless nights, and lost dreams, we clung to each other out of a desperation and need that was so deep and so old, we thought it must be love. In the 10 years we were together, we grew to hate each other, but still clung to the dream of "us." Even though we had lost complete touch with our individual selves (had we ever been in touch?), we still held on to the hope that somehow the "we" could breathe life back into individuals who were dying.

When the end came, after a year of therapy and many years trying to make it work, I thought I would die. I couldn't think of myself as a "me," only as a "we." I looked at the portrait of us on the wall. She hadn't wanted it and I took it with me. Though I didn't recognize the two people in the picture as anyone I now knew, and I was glad to be rid of the pain of our trying, I still liked the idea of a twosome. When I looked in the mirror at my lone face, I felt invisible. It seemed that life only came in pairs. And it seemed there was always someone who matched my own hunger, another who fit me like a key in a lock. "Love" addicts always come in pairs.

For the next year, the thought of finding a relationship possessed me. Saying I would have taken anyone would be too strong. But it was very, very important that I find someone. I told myself, I'm just the kind of guy who does better when he's married. My wish came true. We didn't have our first fight until the night we made love, which was six hours after we met. The next morning we were engaged. After meeting my bride-to-be, some of my closest friends had a heart-to-heart with me. They said she seemed to be a more hostile version of my first wife and they suggested I not move so quickly. I knew they were just jealous and I didn't invite them to the wedding. They were still my friends after the divorce and they didn't even say, "I told you so."
I believe that it has been helpful for me to recognize and name my addictions. The process has allowed me to break patterns that continued to repeat themselves and caused my life to be unmanageable. Calling my behavior "an addiction" allows me to get support from others in Twelve Step Programs. For me it was like coming home, a feeling that "these are my people." They can accept me without judgment because they have walked the same road.

**Sex, Romance, Relationship Addictions, and the Core Addiction**

Although these addictions are related, I believe it is helpful to look at them as separate addictions. We can become addicted to one, two, or all three; just as a drug addict can get hooked on alcohol, cocaine, marijuana or a combination.

Sex addicts express their compulsion through purely sexual means. They may use relationships or romantic encounters to get the sex they need, but sex is primary. We might think of sex addicts as "turning on." They are forever looking for the maximum sexual turn on in any encounter.

Those addicted to romance are hooked on the fantasy of "falling in love." They too may use sex or relationships to achieve their romantic "fix," but their primary desire is for "enchantment." We might think of romance addicts as "shining on." They always seem to have that far away look with starlight in their eyes.

There are two types of relationship addicts. One type is hooked on attachment. They become dependent on one person and remain in bad relationships. Robin Norwood calls them "women who love too much." Men, however, can become just as easily hooked on attachment. We might think of attachment addicts as "holding on." They want to be bonded like glue and their relationships are always sticky.

The other type of relationship addict is hooked on attraction. He or she thrives on the "idea" of relationship. It doesn't matter so much who they are connected with, but connection is primary. They love to be "coupled," but have trouble staying with anyone person and often have a series of marriages or committed relationships. We might think of attraction addicts as always "moving on." They often say such things as "I can't live with
him and I can't live without him." Their solution is not to stay long with anyone person, but to move on to the next man, often claiming "when I find Mr. Right I'll settle down."

I believe too, there is a core addiction, at the center of all our other addictions. It is important to understand and treat the core addiction as well as the separate addictions.

At the core of all our addictions, I believe is child abuse, abandonment, or neglect. This belief is given credence by the research on sexual addiction by Dr. Pat Carnes. In a 1988 study profiling 351 sex addicts, Carnes found the following: 72% reported they had been physically abused as children, 83% reported sexual abuse, and 97% said they had been emotionally abused.

Abused as children we grow up feeling that there is something the matter with us. If Dad or Mom did this to me, it must be because I am bad. We develop a sense of shame, which is deeper and more destructive than guilt. Guilt is the experience of doing something wrong. Shame is the experience of being something wrong.

The core addiction can be understood as a compulsive search for our lost selves. Drawing on an interesting Biblical connection, Scott Peck says that addicts are people who feel they have been cast out of the Garden because they were bad. Addicts, he says, are people who long to go home. Feeling abandoned by our parents, sure that there is something horrible inside ourselves, we begin a search. At the core, all addicts are addicted to looking elsewhere. Since we can only find love by returning to ourselves, our search "out there" inevitably becomes compulsive and out of control.

We can summarize the beliefs and related emotions that are at the core of the "love" addictions as follows:

**Beliefs**

1. I am damaged and therefore bad inside
2. To know me is to leave me or harm me
3. I can't rely on people to meet my needs
4. I need more "love." Too much is not enough
Emotions

1. Shame
2. Fear
3. Distrust
4. Excitement/Depression

Love Addictions Are Much More Common Than We'd Like to Believe

Dr. Carnes estimates that at least one in twelve adults is sexually addicted and many more are romantically addicted. Many believe that "Love Addictions" have become so pervasive that they are ingrained in our society. Only recently has light been shined on the "rich and famous"--Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Gary Hart, John F. Kennedy, and more recently John Tower and Bill Clinton. What was euphemistically called "womanizing" is now being recognized as addiction.

It is more than a little frightening to think of those who lead the country as active sex addicts. (How would we feel if they were active heroin addicts?) We know that one of the characteristics of any addiction is the denial of the problem. (Contrary to what many believe, "denial" is not a river in Egypt.) There is also a kind of social denial that makes it difficult for us to believe that our leaders (parents?) could have serious problems. Thinking about John Tower's loss of the nomination as Secretary of Defense, I recalled an article on Sex in Politics. In asking what is a "womanizer," the article concludes it isn't just a man with a woman other than his wife, but a man whose pursuit of women approaches preoccupation.

Under a large picture of Wilbur Mills, the article notes "His affair with burlesque dancer Fanne Fox brought down the house seniority system." Under the picture of John F. Kennedy, it says, "Confided he needed three women a day to be satisfied." Under the picture of Gary Hart, "Compulsive risk-taker who described himself as a 'frustrated race-car driver.'" Sure enough, I found John Tower. Under his picture the article noted, "Voted 'man we least like to get into an elevator with' by Hill secretaries." It's too bad that Tower didn't recognize his addiction and do something about it.
Gary Hart, many believe, was a trip to Bimini away from becoming our next President. A great deal was written about Hart, most of it sensational and not very perceptive. One person who took the time to delve more deeply was author Gail Sheehy. What she learned about Gary Hart can help us all understand the hidden world of sexually addicted men. It can also help women who are most often conditioned to become hooked on men like Hart.

Six weeks before Hart's campaign self-destructed, Sheehy said in an article she was writing, "Studying Hart on and off for three years, I had become convinced that it wasn't a question of if Gary Hart would destroy himself but a question of when."

In describing a long line of affairs over a period of many years Sheehy notes, "The pattern was always the same: “the indiscriminate hunt, the rush to intimacy, the forced reassurances, then a sudden withdrawal, denial, and rapid retreat."

She asks why would any man in his right mind defy a New York Times reporter who asked about his alleged womanizing to "put a tail on me," then cancel his weekend campaign appearances and arrange a tryst at his Washington town house with a Miami party girl? I suggest the answer is that no one in their right mind would, but that is exactly what an addict would do. Remember that the characteristics of all addictions, whether to alcohol, drugs, romance, relationships or sex is that they are compulsive, out of control, and continue despite the problems they cause in our lives.

If you understand addictions, you wouldn't be confused or shocked at the words Sheehy quotes of a highly placed political consultant who had known Hart for over a decade:

"Gary Hart has been writing in lipstick for years, 'Stop me before I fuck again.'"

Obviously the beat continues to go on. Gary Hart never learned the lessons he might have learned from John Kennedy and Bill Clinton didn’t learn the lessons he could have learned from the experiences of Gary Hart.

"Love" Addictions have become so pervasive in our society they have become the rule rather than the exception. Stanton Peele says of our compulsive search for sex and love, "Addiction is not an abnormality in our society. It is not an aberration from the norm; it is itself the norm."

An examination of the messages shared through popular music shows a clear theme of excess in the search for love. For example, consider the words of Janis Joplin, rock/blues
music legend. "Too much ain't enough!" One client of mine summed up this view by saying, "My drug of choice is 'more.'"

In addition to being one of the most extraordinary singers and personalities of the 60's, Joplin's life can help us understand the behavior of addicts. Her biographer, David Dalton shared the following description of Joplin which personifies the way "love" addicts behave:

Janis insisted on following the bright, colorblind, toenail party of love. Like the fantasy worlds of Gothic Romances and Coke commercials, her notion of love was of such excessive proportions, so extreme and absurd, that it transcended not just the real world but also any real possibility of satisfaction. Janis wanted to make up for the pain of a lifetime in one love affair.

In describing "love" addictions in women, Jennifer Schneider, author of Back From Betrayal: Surviving His Affairs says, "The essence of codependency is obtaining one's worth from the outside rather than from within. The codependent woman lacks a sense of identity. Her dependence on men for her identity is an essential characteristic of the traditional feminine role in Western society."

As "love" addicts we seem always to be moving towards that magical something and away from where we are. We are like confused homing pigeons, flying faster and faster, but in the wrong direction.

**How Do We Become "Love" Addicts and How Is It Related to Other Addictions?**

What are some of the commonalities in life experience that predispose people to "love" addiction? Wounded as children, many of us become afraid to risk developing intimate attachments to others as adults. One man in recovery from addictive relationships, reflecting on his childhood, had this to say. "Looking back today with the help of therapy, I can see that I was a physically and emotionally abused child. When I discovered sexuality I fell in love with it." He acknowledged two themes in his adult life that are common for those addicted to "love," fear and desire. "I looked for situations where I could experience sexual contact without emotional entanglements--sex without commitment." Yet as we run faster and faster to get away from our childhood fears, we get farther and farther away from our only true source of love--ourselves.

What's the relationship between "love" addictions and other addictions? Carnes draws a parallel between "love" addictions and chemical dependencies. Like an alcoholic, the "love" addict substitutes a sick relationship with something outside themselves for a
healthy relationship with others. Carnes notes that "For the addict, the sexual experience is the source of nurturing, focus of energy, and origin of excitement. The addict's relationship with a mood-altering 'experience' becomes central to their lives."

Dr. Eli Coleman, Associate Director of the Human Sexuality Program, University of Minnesota Medical School, points out the pattern of excesses, the lack of control, the amount of preoccupation, and the disruption of their lives that is characteristic of people who are having problems with their sexual and romantic relationships. The same patterns are present for other addictions.

Coleman goes on to make an important distinction between healthy expressions of sexuality and unhealthy or destructive sexuality. He makes no value judgments about any particular expression of sexual or romantic interest. He points out that pornography, prostitution, masturbation, homosexual or heterosexual intercourse, affairs, anonymous sex, or sexual fetishes may be either addictive or non-addictive. It is the pattern of the sexual behavior, its motivation and the resultant outcomes that determine whether it is addictive or non-addictive.

Peele says that an addiction exists when someone's attachment to a person or sensation lessens their ability to deal with other things in the environment or with personal needs. The sex or romance addict becomes increasingly dependent on the sexual behavior as their only source of gratification. He calls it "A sterile, ingrown dependency relationship with another person who serves as the object of our need for security." The "addiction" doesn't come from the "thing," be it a drug or another person, but from the internal void which continually calls out to be filled.

Anne Wilson Schaef says that more and more people are using sex and romance as a way of getting a fix, rather than as a means of relating. For many couples she sees in therapy, 'getting enough sex' translates into avoiding tensions and feelings. They use love making to keep from dealing with themselves. When a "love" addict gets a fix, it serves the same purpose as a drink or a drug, and the personality dynamics that develop are essentially the same.

In sum, "love" addiction is an unhealthy relationship characterized by compulsion, loss of control, cutting off from self and others, and continued involvement despite problems that it causes in a person's life.
“Love” Addictions and Women

The differences between the way men and women experience addiction are not due to the differences in our sexual organs, but to the way we were conditioned by society.

I have found that it is helpful to recognize the way our cultural conditioning limits both men and women and sets us up to become "love" addicts.

We can think of conditioning as producing a set of qualities that women must and men cannot be and a parallel set of qualities that men must be and women cannot be. A partial list might look like this:

Women must be and men cannot be: short, nurturing, tender, feeling, domestic, beautiful, apologetic, curvy, thin, passive, receptive, nice, sweet, hairless, quiet, giving, soft.

Men must be and women cannot be: tall, physically strong, economically powerful, courageous, cool, stoic, successful in the world, good bread-winners, logical, active, aggressive, hairy, athletic, muscular, outspoken, rugged, and tough.

It is crucial that we recognize the relationship between female conditioning and male conditioning. Liberation for women is unquestionably connected to liberation for men.

One cannot occur without the other.

I believe the age of women's liberation and men's liberation is over. It's time we realized that we can never separate and solve "women's problems" or "men's problems." They are opposite sides of the same coin and ultimately will be solved together or not at all.

Dr. Warren Farrell exemplifies this new attitude of reconciliation between men and women. He is the only man to have been elected three times to the Board of the National Organization for Women in New York City. In his book Why Men Are The Way They Are he details the connections between male and female conditioning and the different way each experiences powerlessness.

"When a woman is divorced, has two children, no alimony, no child support, and no job experience--that is her experience of powerlessness; when a man is in the hospital with a coronary bypass operation caused by the stress of working two jobs to support two
children his former wife won't let him see, and he feels no other woman will get involved with him because of those very circumstances--that is his experience of powerlessness."

In the introduction to his book, Farrell offers "A Message to Women--Mostly." He says, "I found that those women who could hear men's stories--without seeing them as taking away from their own--were among the few whose independence seemed to come out of internal security, who were not turning life into a fight, and who had consistently good relationships with men. For some women, feminism had opened the whole vista of reexamining roles--including men's roles. For others the deeper the feminism, the more closed the women were to men. Strict ideology is for women what macho is for men."

Dr. Charlotte Kasl is one feminist who has focused on women as well as men and has developed a most perceptive analysis of women and "love" addictions. Her book, *Women. Sex, and Addiction: A Search for Love and Power* is excellent.

A few quotes from Women and Sex Addiction will give you a flavor of her work:

"I believe that sexual addiction or coaddiction is frequently the baseline addiction for women who were sexually abused or exploited as children. That is, it is the core addiction underlying food, alcohol, work, drugs, shopping, and cleaning addictions.

"The one exception is codependency, that is, an addiction to a destructive relationship with another person. This is another base-line addiction.

"All the women I interviewed talked about having no boundaries in their life.

"In all cases there was an unholy alliance with one or both parents. This could take the form of being a parent's confidant, being used as a weapon to make the other parent jealous, being daddies darling daughter, or being best friends with either parent.

"Almost without exception the women used pornography or had been exposed to it as children. Violence entered into many sexually addicted relationships as the need for intensity increased.

"One common link was that nearly all women had had fantasies of suicide.

"Almost all of the women had food issues, past and/or present."
"Most of the women felt deep shame over their sexual addictions because their behavior was so inconsistent with their values. As one woman said, 'I got excited by pornography and pornographic movies. How's that for feminist values?' Kasl offers the case of another client and concludes, "For a lesbian woman who is involved in S & M it is almost unbearably painful to wake up, meet reality, and realize she has abused or been abused by the mirror of herself, another woman."

Kasl recognizes the connection between addiction and spirituality. "Addiction," she says, "is, essentially, a spiritual breakdown, a journey away from the truth into emotional blindness and death."

She concludes with these words: "I believe the epidemic proportions of sexual addiction and co-addiction in this culture reflect the spiritual breakdown of patriarchy, which is based on the exploitation of all women. I believe the growing realization of both men and women that sexual addiction is rampant reflects a desire for this culture to wake up, stop objectifying women and mistaking sex for love, intimacy, and power. We do not violate people when we see them as human mirrors of ourselves, we violate others when we create them in our minds as objects, hence inferior, and threatening to ourselves.

"Love" Addiction and Culture

What we have learned about sex and romance is often quite distorted. Movies and songs which were so popular as we grew up gave some strange notions about love. We learned that love is blind, to be truly in love is to suffer, that love is like a roller coaster alternating between the highs of ecstatic desire and the lows of devastating pain. We FALL in love and become obsessed with desire. It's no wonder that the words "love" and "heart" go so easily with "sick" and "break."

Dorothy Tennov, in her sensitive and profound book *Love And Limerence: The Experience of Being in Love*, says at the outset that most of us confuse love with something else. "It is not love. It is the force of evolution expressed as the compulsion for the particular, this particular one above all others. Often, it is called love ..."

Elizabeth Janeway, in her book *Man's World, Woman's Place* shows how ingrained are the social myths that underlie our cultural definitions of what women and men can become. She quotes an age old saying, "It's a man's world. Woman's place is in the home," and shows that though obviously not true there is a power that continues to hold it in place. "Facts," she says, "can be disproved, and theories based on them will yield in time to rational arguments and proof that they don't work. But myth has its own, furious,
inherent reason-to-be because it is tied to desire (emphasis mine). Prove it false a hundred times, and it will still endure because it is true as expression of feeling."

We aren't just conditioned to associate "love" with "obsession" through the popular media, but through our most profound literature. Is Romeo and Juliet about love or about addiction?

Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy has been acclaimed the world's greatest novel. Some have read it as the ultimate love story as it describes the relationship between the beautiful Anna and dashing Count Vronsky. But listen to the way the consummation of their love is described. "That which for nearly a year had been the one absorbing desire of Vronsky's life, supplanting all his former desires; that which for Anna had been an impossible, terrible, but all the more bewitching dream of bliss, had come to pass."

Are these feelings of love or the beginnings of addiction? "Looking at him, she had a physical sense of her degradation and could not utter another word. He felt what a murderer must feel when he looks at the body he has robbed of life."

She gives up everything to please her lover but the relationship deteriorates. She must take morphia at night to dull the pain of her suffering which is finally relieved by her death beneath the wheels of a truck. For Anna, romantic love had become an addiction that killed her. Many millions of people, developing their own addictions to "love," believe that being in love means being in pain. Too many people are quite willing to die for love, but too few are really willing to live for it.

**Feminist Perspective on "Love" Addiction**

How does the prior explanation relate to a feminist perspective on "love" addiction? Women, particularly, are socialized to believe that it is their responsibility to ensure that relationships in their lives are positive. Additionally, caring for others' needs is considered to be a female mandate, even when that behavior involves self-sacrifice.

Males receive the opposite conditioning. As Janeway so aptly describes the male's desire: "I want a woman of my own, whom I can command, and who will respond willingly, to comfort me in my lack and loneliness and frustration as my mother did long ago." She goes on to note how this need expands and becomes destructive. "Out of the need, however, grows the demanding mythic imperative, for our statement goes on to assert that a man does not just need a woman, he has a right to her and that right is part of the
order of the world." Farrell recognizes that this belief taken to its extreme leads to violence. Men, he says, are conditioned to become "mini-rapists."

Martyrdom is almost a sine qua non of traditional feminine sex role socialization. Farrell notes that women are conditioned to become "mini-masochists."

It isn't surprising to find that men are more often hooked on attraction--the compulsive search for new, exciting sexual and romantic interests. Women, on the other hand, are more often hooked on attachment--the compulsive need to hold onto a single relationship, no matter how bad it gets. Those who are dependent on attraction and experience a succession of relationships have an exaggerated need for space. Their irrational fear is of being trapped or engulfed. However, for those people who are dependent on attachment their primary need is for connection. They have irrational fears of loss or abandonment.

Unfortunately many women, in their desire to free themselves from traditional sex roles, have gone to the other extreme and have taken on the addictive traits characteristic of men. Smoking cigarettes, for instance, used to be seen as not "lady-like." Many women have refused to be ladies and are dying like men.

It used to be that it was women who "loved too much" and men who "lusted too much." Again, many women decided if "he can mess around, so can I." Increasingly, I see women coming into treatment because of their compulsive sexual acting out.

A feminist perspective on "love" addiction, then, suggests that the origins of the addictions may be in our oversubscription to traditional sex role stereotypes of what it is to be male and female in society. As we are told that there is something missing in us that can only be obtained from the "opposite sex" ·we begin our search. Whether our sexual preference is for a man or a woman, "love" addiction is driven by our belief that we are not whole and complete, that our full humanity can" only be regained by filling the "black hole" we feel inside.

A feminist perspective on "love" addiction can also assist us in understanding the roots of addiction that can be traced to early childhood experience. Those of us who were damaged as children (many researchers believe that 80-95% of us grew up in dysfunctional families) will grow up to damage our own children, who themselves will pass on the damage. We can break the cycle of abuse by developing our own program of recovery.
Feminism and The Twelve Steps

Feminism, according to Nan Van Den Bergh and Lynn Cooper in an article titled “Feminist Visions for Social Work,” "Is a call for transforming the world from competitive, hierarchical, and authoritarian relationships to a world based on gender and racial equality." Feminist social work practice, they say, is built on five fundamental principles:

1. Eliminating false dichotomies and artificial separations.
2. Reconceptualizing power.
3. Valuing process as equally important as product.
4. Validating renaming.
5. Believing that the personal is political.

Although members of Twelve Step programs, and many feminists, might not agree that the two approaches are related, I believe there is a common bond. What follows are some of the connections that I see. Although I use Alcoholics Anonymous as an example of "Twelve Step Programs," this analysis could apply equally well to Sex and Love Addict is Anonymous or other programs based on the Twelve Steps of A.A.

The phenomenal success of Twelve Step programs since A.A. was founded in 1935 rests, in part, on their ability to transform "power over" relationships into "power-from-within" and "power-with" relationships, as Starhawk calls them.

Let's look at each of these principles and see how they fit with Twelve Step practice.

1. Eliminating false dichotomies and artificial separations.

The most basic way in which Twelve Step programs overcome false dichotomies and artificial separations is in their belief that everyone who comes to a program is absolutely equal with everyone else. Regardless of class, status, sex, or sexual orientation, inside the program each of us is seen as suffering from an addiction and each of us is like all others in our ability to recover.

In Twelve Step programs there are no leaders or artificial hierarchies. There is no chief executive officer having authority to direct, no treasurer who can compel payment of dues, no board of directors that can set policy.
The second tradition says that "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern." Many people have trouble with the sexist, Christian language which is a remnant of A.A.'s origin in the 1930's and their connection to the Oxford Group, an evangelically styled attempt to recapture the spirit of early Christianity.

Adherents of Twelve Step programs are able to go below the surface of the language and found the non-sexist core at the center. One woman, reflecting on her recovery says, "The AA Big Book said God didn't have to be Christian--it could be anything bigger than my small self, like nature, my AI-Anon group, or a spirit underlying things. Yet the language of the Big Book was archaic, Christian, and patriarchal: God (and the book's assumed reader) was male." She goes on to say, "Prayer had repelled me since childhood, and so did Christianity, in both its lukewarm, liberal form and its coercive, fundamentalist form.

But because I was so unhappy, I rewrote the Big Book's suggested prayer ('God, I offer myself to Thee to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt') into a Buddhist form I could live with. Kneeling on my bedroom floor for the first time since childhood, I prayed, 'Force of rhythm and meaning moving through all things including me, harmony understood by the Buddha and other enlightened human beings, I offer myself to you. Please relieve me of investment in illusion of the separate self.'" These words were written by Lily Collett in an article in Mother Jones, "Step by step: A skeptic's encounter with the Twelve-Step program."

The spiritual basis of Twelve Step programs differs from any religion, in that each person defines for themselves the nature of their "higher power." As Starhawk says, "AA's second step is to open to mystery. 'We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.'"

2. Reconceptualizing Power.

VanDen Bergh & Cooper say "Patriarchal processes are characterized by creating power dichotomies--in essence, generating conditions of 'haves and have-nots.'" This often happens in organizations through the differential awarding of monies. Tradition eight of Twelve Step programs says that the organization "should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers."

No one in the program gets paid for helping others. In Twelve Step programs there is a clear distinction between doing the work because this is my LIFE and doing the work because it is my LIVELIHOOD. This tradition doesn't preclude those who want to work
in the field from becoming professionals, but their professional work which is paid is clearly separated from their Twelve Step work which is not.

The program can hire janitors, cooks, or receptionists to keep things running. Twelve Step organizations are the only ones I know where the top executives work for nothing while the "support staff" get paid. This certainly helps to put into practice the belief that all work is equally valued.


This principle maintains that how one pursues a goal is as important as the accomplishment of the goal itself. The goal of Twelve Step programs is to help ourselves by helping others. The 12th step of A.A. says "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

Twelve Step programs believe that how the message is carried is as important as the message itself and the results it produces in attracting new membership. Tradition eleven says "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion ... "

Advertising has become the cornerstone of Patriarchal society. A political party wishes to win an election, so it advertises the virtues of its leadership to draw votes. A worthy charity wants to raise money. It seems natural to print the names of prominent people on their letterhead to let others know that the organization is worthy of support.

Twelve Step programs believe that it is important to focus on their work and let others spread the word. They believe in word-of-mouth advertising. And it has worked amazingly well. The original Twelve Step Program, A.A., has a worldwide membership approaching 2 million. There are now over 200 different Twelve Step programs dealing with everything from sex and love to gambling and smoking.

4. Validity of Renaming.

In 1606 intoxication was made a statutory offense in England by an "Act for Repressing the Odious and Loathsome Sin of Drunkenness." This attitude was carried to America and formed the basis of most people's beliefs about those who drank.

A.A. was founded on June 10, 1935, when Dr. Bob Smith took his last drink. His sobriety had resulted from the care and concern of friends and the willingness of a "rum hound from New York," Bill Wilson, to share his own battle with the bottle.
For the first time in history, in the kinship of common suffering and hope, one drinker had talked to another and something totally new had been created.

Three things were significant. The first was that a new name was created - alcoholic, which implied that one was not "bad" but had a problem that could be treated. The other was that no one else should label another. The people with the problem must decide themselves what label, if any, to use. Third, that the best people to help were others having the same problem, not professional therapists who many felt had done little to help and even caused harm to many.

VanDen Bergh & Cooper say, "The second potential renaming action, changing meanings by altering the formats of words, can be accomplished by the utilization of hyphens or slashes ... Hidden deceptions within language can be revealed by dividing words and employing alternative meanings for prefixes." Re-looking at "Therapist" as "The rapist" can remind us of the danger of traditional treatment for addictions and other dis-eases.

5. The Personal Is Political

Alcoholics Anonymous began from the desire of one person to help himself by helping another human being. It has grown to become a force throughout the world. Not only has it spawned many similar Twelve Step Programs, such as AlAnon (for family and friends), Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, but it has given impetus for "mutual support" groups of all kinds.

It has offered a way for people to turn their personal suffering and powerlessness into a personal and social force that can change individuals and change the world.

Conclusion

I hope my attempts to offer my perspective on "love" addiction has been helpful. Please take what has been useful and leave the rest. I believe that "love" addictions, like all addictions, are progressive and ultimately fatal if not treated. I have found that the treatment that works best for most is based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. There are a number of organizations dealing with "love" addictions which I list at the end of this booklet. If you feel you may need help, I encourage you to check them out.
Elizabeth Kubler Ross once observed that "life becomes richer when we realize that we are like snowflakes, each of us absolutely beautiful and unique and each of us here for a very short time."

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