

Putting Out the Flame of Desire: More about Love Addiction

Susan Peabody

Poets have no right to picture love as blind; its blindfold must be removed so that it can have the use of eyes.

— Pascal, as quoted by Jose Ortega y Gasset in *On Love*

The following letter was written to one of my readers in response to his letter of April 13, 2004. He has given me permission to excerpt his letter so that others might benefit from my advice.

Dear Tom,

Thank you for sharing your story with me. I have excerpted some of your thoughts and made the following comments. I hope they are helpful. (Your original words are in bold.)

“I had the arousal of intense feelings . . .” Love addiction is triggered by intense emotion which becomes projected on to the object of our desire. Because we did not get our needs met as children, we are very vulnerable when these feelings come up. We have what Howard Halpern calls an “attachment hunger.” We are like starving men and women ready to devour love. In your particular case, since you spent so much time during your adolescence suppressing your sexual feelings, you are vulnerable when you feel desire. In other words, your personal history has pre-disposed you to being a love addict.

“Soon, I began thinking about him everyday . . .” Once the mood-altering experience (desire, arousal, passion) comes up, the addiction moves forward. In recovery you will learn to nip this in the bud at this stage so that “attraction” will not become “addiction.”

“We did everything together . . .” Contact with the object of our desire pushes the addiction to the next level. It does not have to be sexual contact. You have had sex with this man many times—in your head—so you are sexually involved. I have discovered from my own experience, and my work with other love addicts, that when our feelings are sexual we are even more powerless than if the relationship were platonic.

“I have stalked him, followed him, checked up on him, broken into his house searching for anything that could give me information about him . . .” Addictive behavior is just our desperation being manifested. Even if we control the behavior, we cannot control the feelings.

“He was in recovery for sexual addiction . . .” Many people have analyzed the nature of attraction. My theory is we gravitate toward that which expresses openly what we suppress. This man would certainly be attractive to you because of your history of trying to suppress your sexuality. Your attraction to this person might fade when you become more like him. This does not mean you should become a sex addict yourself. But certainly you must find a healthy sexual relationship if you are to recover and “be yourself.” Love addiction feeds on isolation and fantasy. One warning, however: One of my clients is married and still very addicted to his high school sweetheart. This is because he does not engage in his marriage. He just shows up like a robot. I suggest you look for a healthy, invigorating relationship to channel your human need for sexual expression and companionship. This relationship will not be as exciting as the one you are engaged in now . . . but more about that later.

“Every person that he has been with has caused a major pain in my heart. I view his affairs as a rejection of myself . . .” This is what keeps us hooked. Love addicts will do ANYTHING to avoid feeling rejected. We will hold onto our addictive love, way past its time, just hoping that the person we love will come around and want us as much as we want him or her. We are afraid that if we let go we will miss this reunion—a reunion for which we live. I say “re” union because the object of our desire is really a manifestation of our lost selves. We are split off from ourselves because of shame. If we unite with the loved one, we symbolically reunite with our lost selves. We crave this so badly. As you consciously and unconsciously integrate with yourself, your obsession to unite with this man may fade.

“I fear abandonment from him . . .” The operative word here is fear. The objects of our desire not only represent our lost *selves*, they represent the lost parent. Since all children fear abandonment, our “inner child” fears

abandonment even after we become adults. The problem with love addicts is that because we were actually abandoned or neglected as children, we cannot process our fear. It takes on a life of its own. It becomes terror. It is life and death for us. When I was 3 years old, I had to go into the hospital for 3 months. I was terrified. Something broke inside of me when my mother left me there everyday—alone with my terror. Now, my fear of abandonment haunts me. In 12-Step programs people process their fear by initiating a relationship with a Higher Power. I use imagery to help me. I imagine myself being held, comforted and taken care of. Sometimes I see myself in the arms of God, the Father. Sometimes I see myself “in the garden” with Jesus. Sometimes I am with Spirit who is more feminine and nurturing. She is my “comforter” and “counselor.”

“I cannot go a week without hearing his voice, although he lives several states away from me. I fantasize about him daily . . .” The mood-altering experience of sexual feelings is prolonged by fantasies. You might say we get high off of the fantasies. They become our “drug of choice.” We do not feel our anger, sadness, depression, confusion or loneliness when we get high. Curtailing the fantasies is important—but an arduous task. You should begin by controlling your behavior and then look for ways to distract yourself from fantasizing.

“I have fantasies of us being together *one day* in happiness . . .” This particular fantasy begins in childhood. We are “stuck” in our childhood. We are unhappy, frightened and lonely. Like people trapped in prison, we dream about happiness in the future. When we get out of prison we don’t realize we have been released, so we keep feeding this fantasy about living happily ever-after “someday.” To keep this fantasy alive, we gravitate toward “unavailable” people.

“I have the urgent longing in my heart and am afraid to let go, afraid to tell him my truth. It has been almost fifteen years of hidden passion, hidden truth, hidden love. I have tried several times of slowly letting go, I do not make calls to him anymore. He calls me at least twice a week. Some calls I will ignore. When the anxiety gets too great, I need to relieve the pressure and make contact. He is my addiction, my addict . . .” Yes! been there . . . done that. This is an insidious disease. Please note, however, that there is no secret here. Believe me, he knows how you feel.

“He is in a relationship that has lasted five years, he has been having an affair with another man for about a year. Neither of them know of each other . . .” This is what sex addicts do. It does not sound like he is in recovery.

“He tells me what I want to hear but does not tell me more for fear of hurting me . . .” He does not withhold information to avoid hurting you. He does this to control you. He is addicted to your affection. It bolsters his ego. It abates his fear of abandonment. He is a love addict too—just of another type. He will never let you go willingly. That is why he calls you when you do not call him. He is what Pia Mellody calls the “avoidance addict.” Her whole book, *Facing Love Addiction*, is about the relationship between the love addict and the avoidance addict. I mention it briefly on page 129 of my book.

“Therefore, I have adverted to other forms of investigation to get to the truth of his affairs . . .” This is typical love addict behavior. We rarely suffer without trying to relieve our pain which is abated momentarily by contact of any kind (fantasies, phone calls, spying, drive-bys, letters, emotions—anything). WITHDRAWAL for the love addict is loss of contact. Just like the heroin addict in the later stages, we need a constant “fix” to avoid withdrawal.

“I know I need to stop . . .” You are powerless over your feelings, but you are not powerless over your behavior. If you align yourself with God and join a support group you will get better.

“It is like having a wound that will not heal, and every time I investigate I cut my wound deeper . . .” I am a “cutter” in recovery. I began by carving the initials of a boy I had a crush on in the 6th grade. Self-mutilation is a common expression of shame, self-loathing, and depression. Whether we cut up our bodies, or rip our hearts and souls to shreds with shame, we must learn to love ourselves and respect our bodies. There is a lot on the internet about cutting. If you substitute “emotional self-mutilation” for the word “cutting” you may be able to understand what you are doing to yourself. There is also a good book about the borderline personality disorder that discusses this. It is *I Hate You Don’t Leave Me* by Jerold Kreisman. I cut myself to transfer my emotional heartache to physical pain. I call this: “Nail me the cross, but don’t hurt my feelings.”

“I am emotionally weak . . .” The emotional development of most love addicts was interrupted at some point in their lives due to stress and trauma.

Once we get into recovery we must re-activate the maturation process. We must grow up. This is a painful process that take years. It is our only hope. I was *not* able to do this on my own or with therapy alone. I have found the 12-Steps of recovery very helpful with regard to this “growing up” process. See this as your metamorphoses. Break free from the cocoon of love addiction and become your real self.

“I am afraid of dying . . .” For love addicts, love is LIFE and DEATH. All infants are intuitively aware that they will die without care. As we get older we substitute the word “love” for “care” and we feel we will die without it.

“I am afraid of being alone . . .” The fear of loneliness is right up there with the fear of abandonment. Adults, who got *consistent* love and attention while they were growing up, can process their fear of being alone. Love addicts cannot. So we hold on to whatever we can get our hands on (sometimes we take people hostage) no matter how toxic it might be.

“I am afraid of going insane . . .” If the addiction is not aborted, you may very well go insane. Fortunately, for me, I “came to believe” that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity. (Step 2 in a 12-Step program)

“I am single and cannot have a relationship with anyone, for no one measures up to my addict . . .” Love addicts are often addicted to drama and excitement. We don’t want love, we want to get high. Romantic love sends certain chemicals flowing through our bloodstream that are very similar to anti-depressants. Love abates our depression. I can understand that a healthier kind of love would be less enticing, but you are an addict and your addiction is killing you. If you end contact with this man (he will *not* make it easy) and go through withdrawal, then try and accept the fact that “real” love will always be less exciting than addiction. Intense desire—which abates your depression—has turned on you. The cure is worse than the disease. Find another way to treat your depression or live with it. I do both.

Final Comments

People often ask me “When does desire turn into addiction?” It is at the moment you let your mind believe that only *one particular* person can satisfy your needs. This is an erroneous idea fed to you by your “dis-ease.” As you have come to realize, when you allowed yourself to become fixated on this *one* man who “has to love you or you will die,” you became a full-blown love

addict. I encourage you to reverse this process. First, remind yourself as often as you can that there is never just one person in the world to love. There is ALWAYS someone new to love if we are open to this. Keep telling yourself this until the day comes when you really understand and believe it. Your obsession will not make this easy. The addicted mind wants to stay addicted. It is the heart that aches to be free.

Once your fixation on one particular person is broken, begin telling yourself the truth about other things. For instance, if you have been “broken” by your childhood or your addiction, no other person can fix you. We all fix ourselves with the help of a Higher Power. Others can satisfy us, love us, enhance our life, bring us happiness—but they cannot fix us.

Of course, there are other “truths” and you will find them on the road to recovery. Books will reveal the truth to you. Experienced and wise people will reveal the truth to you. That small, clear voice within (once you are in recovery) will reveal the truth to you. So *search out* the truth, *tell yourself* the truth, *remind yourself* of the truth, *believe* the truth, and then pass it on.

In conclusion, I recommend that you enter into recovery. Recovery means change, as well as investigation. When you understand your disease, the next step is to write about it, talk about it, find a support group to supplement your recovery and then *change*.

On my website, <http://www.brightertomorrow.net>, there is a copy of my new book, *The Art of Changing*. Read it and get back to me with any questions you have about your own personal recovery. I will keep you in my prayers Tom.

Susan Peabody is the author of *Addiction to Love: Overcoming Obsession and Dependency in Relationships*. For more of her writings see her website <http://www.brightertomorrow.net/>