

Recovering

The Adventure of Life Beyond Addiction

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Addiction to Love: Crimes of the Heart

by Susan Peabody

Addiction to love is a powerful disorder. As it progresses into the later stages, some love addicts will experience a form of temporary insanity. By this I mean that an abnormal state of mind takes over and they become powerless over their own behavior. It is in this altered state of consciousness that love addicts put everything on the line in the name of love. Some love addicts in this condition will even break the law despite all the risks involved.

Breaking the Law

Crimes of the heart are not all the same. Sometimes they are just the result of misguided loyalty (the obsessive need to stand by your loved one no matter what the cost). For instance, some love addicts will get talked into being an accomplice to a crime. They lack the ability to say "no" to their partner, or to set limits on what they will do to keep the relationship going. Being an accomplice can mean anything from driving the car in an armed robbery to harboring a fugitive. It might also mean perjury.

These acts are not done without a great deal of remorse. I am not talking about Bonnie and Clyde here. Most love addicts agonize over their decision to become involved in situations that are dangerous and against the law. They have a healthy sense of right or wrong, but regardless of their fears or misgivings, they become powerless over their need to hold on to

their partner. They are dependent people, and they give new meaning to the word sacrifice.

Love addicts, who are also caretakers, will sometimes commit crimes to make money which they then use to take care of their partner. Love addicts who are unable to hold down a full-time job are particularly susceptible to this temptation. They may become prostitutes or drug dealers in order to support their partner. However, even employed love addicts have been known to steal money to meet the desires or imagined needs of the person they are addicted to. Perhaps they are involved with a drug addict and feel responsible for supporting his or her cocaine addiction. When their salary is not enough to keep their partner supplied they embezzle money. In 1985, the head of the Housing Authority in a major West Coast city resigned because she was suspected of pocketing money to support her husband's drug habit. Needless to say, her career was ruined.

Will You Love Me?

The mantra of the love addict/caretaker is "If I take care of you, will you love me?" Once a relationship has been established using this as the guiding principle, love addicts will go to any length to meet their end of the bargain. They will risk their safety and freedom to take care of someone they have become enmeshed with and emotionally dependent on. Once again, most love addicts know what they are doing is wrong, or dangerous; still, they risk everything because they are blinded by their addiction.

An Explosion of Violence

Many crimes of the heart involve violence.

Sometimes this happens when love addicts become overwhelmed by their abnormal jealousy and possessiveness—usually when the relationship is breaking up—and they become unable to control themselves. In a state of temporary insanity some love addicts try to take control of the situation by becoming violent. They think, “If I can’t have you, no one can.” This is the scenario we see in the movie *Fatal Attraction*. In real life we see this illustrated in the case of Jean Harris, who was convicted of killing Dr. Tarnower in upstate New York. Even if you believe her defense, in which she claims the killing was an accident, it is apparent that someone died because of the inability of a love addict to overcome her obsession or to let go of an addictive relationship.

Violence can also erupt when love addicts become enmeshed in abusive/dependent relationships. Many love addicts caught in this situation are totally unable to deal with their feelings of loss when a relationship ends, so they allow abuse to occur rather than move on. Some love addicts may be fed up with the abuse, but they feel powerless to leave, so killing their partner seems like the only way out of the situation. These circumstances were graphically depicted in the made-for-television movie entitled *The Burning Bed*, starring Farrah Fawcett.

In some cases, love addicts do find the courage to leave an addictive/abusive relationship, only to find out their partner is not ready to let go. In such cases both partners are addicted to each other, but one tries to break the dependency by moving on before the other is ready. When this happens the partner who is hanging on may try to take control of the situation by getting violent and harassing his ex-lover via threatening phone calls, slashed tires, etc. This can go on for months or years, and very often, in the midst of this tug of war, a crime is committed. This is illustrated by the story of a woman I recently saw on the Oprah Winfrey show. She was a love addict trying to liberate herself from an abusive relationship. She left her partner and he began to harass her. She called the police and got no help. She got a restraining order and her former lover ignored it. In desperation, she bought a gun to protect herself. Then, the next time her partner showed up to harass her, she became overwhelmed by her fear and shot him. Like others in a similar situation, this woman was not protected by the law and she went to jail. (There are strict guidelines for legal self-defense, and many people who try to

protect themselves from an abusive partner are convicted of a crime). If you doubt that this woman was a love addict just because she was trying to get out of the relationship, let me add that before she went to jail, she took this man into her home and cared for him while he recuperated from the gunshot wounds.

Endangering Children

The most serious crimes connected to addictive relationships involve children. Some love addicts are convicted of child endangerment because of their addiction. A few years ago, I watched a woman on a well-known talk show try to explain why she left her children clinging to a fence on a busy freeway. She was trying to make the audience understand that her boyfriend had insisted that she abandon her children and she felt powerless to disobey him.

Even more astounding are the cases of love addicts who stand by while their children are abused or even murdered by their partner. This sounds horrendous and unbelievable. How can this happen? Well, once again, many love addicts feel powerless over their need to hold onto a relationship no matter what the cost. In such cases, obsession and dependency have taken their toll. Either out of misguided loyalty, or to avoid separation anxiety (withdrawal), some love addicts stand by in a state of suspended animation while their children are abused, or they ignore the signs that abuse has occurred, hoping that the problem will go away if they bury their heads in the sand. This is the darkest side of addiction to love—the inability of some love addicts to protect their children from an abusive partner.

While most love addicts will not end up breaking the law in the name of love, the hungry heart should not be underestimated. Addiction to love is insidious and progressive; anything can happen if recovery is not initiated. When a crime is committed because of obsession and dependency, love addicts pay a heavy price. Sometimes they must spend all or some of their lives in prison. If they get out, they may have a hard time finding employment because of their criminal record. They must also live with the guilt they feel for subjecting themselves and others to their temporary insanity. Even if they are not caught, love addicts have to live with their remorse and the loss of self-esteem that results from being powerless over their addiction. To say the least, their lives are affected in a dramatic

and negative way.

Moving into Recovery

Despite the problems that many love addicts create for themselves in the name of love, they can turn their lives around by initiating a program of recovery. This recovery program should diminish the demons that drive love addicts—low self-esteem, an excessive hunger for love, and an abnormal fear of abandonment, rejection, loneliness and deprivation. Such a program should include identifying and changing the destructive values, thoughts and behaviors that draw love addicts into unhealthy relationships; finding help to heal the wounds of childhood trauma (perhaps a therapist or 12-step support group); making amends when possible; forgiving oneself for past transgressions; building up self-esteem; learning how to avoid unhealthy relationships; and embracing spirituality for its healing effects. Most of all, this recovery program should include putting the past into perspective and moving on to a more fulfilling and healthy lifestyle.



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